
A Step into The Past

Book 14

Huang Yi

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Author : Huang Yi

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Chapter 01

Xianyang Happenings

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at the cup of wine Dan Meimei presented to him but could not see anything unusual.

He did not believe that the poison will dissolve into the wine immediately. However, all he can rely on is the illumination of the oil lamp, which makes it more difficult for him to scrutinise the wine.

He gave up the idea of exposing Guan Zhongxie. He wasn't intimidated by him as he is confident that he can make Dan Meimei confess that Guan Zhongxie to be the mastermind behind the poisoning.

The problem is by doing so; it is equivalent to openly opposing Lu Buwei. Their underground battle will come to light.

Remembering that Lu Buwei has another several years of ultimate power, he decided to play safe for the time being.

Moreover, this issue may become even more complicated and even affect Lao Ai indirectly.

At the same time, he wonders if he can pretend to drink the poisonous wine. This will make Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao leave him alone for time being. When the matter has passed, it will cause confusion among them. They may

be misled into thinking that Xiang Shaolong is immune to poison or that Dan Meimei did not poison him in the first place. Their infighting will only benefit him.

These thoughts flashed through his mind very quickly and he reached a decision in a split second.

Xiang Shaolong held the poisonous wine with one hand and embraced Dan Meimei's waist with the other and laughed: "Miss Meimei needs to drink another mouthful of wine to make it exactly half a cup."

With his back to Guiyan and Guan Zhongxie, he forced Dan Meimei to take another sip of wine.

All the colour in Dan Meimei's face disappeared and she strongly fought back and protested: "Official Xiang is so barbaric!"

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to release his hold on her. As Dan Meimei has been resisting fiercely all the while, she lost her balance and fell on the floor.

While everybody is focusing on Dan Meimei, Xiang Shaolong swiftly flicked his wrist and scattered the wine under the table. At the same instant, he pretended to help Dan Meimei up and concealed his extra movement. His cover-up was perfect.

Dan Meimei sat upright in shock and was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "It is my fault for causing Miss to fall down. I deserved to be punished!" He raised his cup and pretended to drink the poisonous wine.

Opposite him, Lord Changping sighed: "Official Xiang is really amazing. This is the first time I saw Dan Meimei lying down on the floor in front of everyone." Everyone burst out in laughter at his comments.

Xiang Shaolong put down his wine cup and noticed Dan Meimei's head still lowered with guilt. She did this to prevent others from witnessing the fear and unease in her eyes.

On his left, Guiyan poured more wine for him.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: "If Official Xiang can bear with some pain, I am sure Dan Meimei will lie down again tonight!"

The two Lords broke out in more laughter while the other girls are expressing a mixture of smiles and jealousy.

Xiang Shaolong embraced Dan Meimei's slender waist and placed another cup of wine beside her lip, gently saying: "Please forgive me by drinking this cup of wine!"

Dan Meimei parted her sexy lips and stared at him with mixed emotions in her eyes. She then drank the entire cup of wine silently.

Everyone cheered loudly.

On his other side, Guiyan was annoyed: “Official Xiang is so biased!”

Xiang Shaolong could see that Guan Zhongxie was not suspicious of him and was secretly happy. He boasted: “I am the most unbiased man. Come! Let me serve Miss Guiyan in drinking wine too.”

Lord Changwen egged: “You should feed her wine from your mouth to make it more interesting.”

Guiyan chortled and actually lay down on Xiang Shaolong’s lap with an inviting and seductive look on her face. Luckily, her position did not affect his injured leg.

Although a beautiful woman is lying on his lap, Xiang Shaolong is not the least aroused. Firstly, he was busy peeping at Dan Meimei and Guan Zhongxie’s reaction. Secondly, he knew that Guiyan is sent here to please him, the mighty Imperial Cavalry Commander, and is full of insincerity.

Guiyan may not be as pretty as Dan Meimei but is considered the second prettiest among all the girls present. Only Guan Zhongxie’s Yang Yu can be considered on par with her. He could not resist taking advantage of her and poured a cup of wine into his mouth without swallowing it. He then lowered his head, matched her lips and let the wine slowly trickle out of his mouth.

Guiyan moaned slightly and drank the wine skilfully. It is really not easy to drink wine lying down and it must be quite challenging for her.

With everyone cheering him on, Xiang Shaolong was about to withdraw

when out of a sudden, Guiyan grabbed him tightly and forced some wine back into his mouth.

Xiang Shaolong was very aroused and forgot about his inhibitions. He sent his tongue into her mouth and they frenched for a while before separating.

Everyone cheered wildly.

Guiyan leaned on him weakly and seductively whined: “Can Official Xiang stay here tonight? I guarantee that your injury will not be affected.”

As she was whining into his ear, only Dan Meimei on his other side can hear the words she mentioned. Dan Meimei trembled slightly and lowered her head again, as if she is lamenting over Xiang Shaolong’s impending death and that she is his murderer.

Xiang Shaolong kissed Guiyan’s forehead and smiled: “If you do not make love wholeheartedly, it is not worth it.” His hand snaked over and hugged Dan Meimei again and feigned surprise: “Is something bothering Miss Meimei?”

Dan Meimei was stunned and sadly replied: “Official Xiang only has eyes for Sister Guiyan so I am naturally upset.”

Guan Zhongxie hurriedly spoke up for her: “Official Xiang is truly impressive and can even make Dan Meimei jealous. We brothers are all in awe of your talents.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for calling himself his brother. Lord Changwen smiled: “Looks like Official Xiang has to feed her a cup of wine too.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that he might as well go all the way and tempt this female murderess. He prepared and held another cup of wine in his mouth and leaned over to match Dan Meimei’s lips. After he finished feeding her the wine in his mouth, he refused to let her go and frenched her deeply. Using all his kissing technique and tricks he learnt in the 21st century, he did his best to tempt and arouse her.

Dan Meimei’s cold demeanour melted and starting burning with passion.

Xiang Shaolong knew that with his kissing skills and his impending death, Dan Meimei will feel even more remorseful and may even really fall in love with him.

After some time, tears can be seen in the corner of her eyes, affirming that she was forced to poison him.

Xiang Shaolong did not want to leave yet as he is concerned that the spilt wine under the table has not evaporated yet.

Guiyan came over to fondle him too. Inspired, Xiang Shaolong spilled another cup of wine under the table to hide the earlier spill.

After a series of caressing, Dan Meimei surprising excused herself and took her leave.

Without this popular babe, the Lords were less enthusiastic compared to before. Xiang Shaolong took the chance to take his leave too.

Whether she is sincere or putting up an act, Guiyan actually sent him all the way to the front courtyard. She made him promised to come back for her before she allowed him to board Lord Changwen's carriage.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong finds himself more and more interested in this ancient 'Black Leopard Bar.'

Back at the Command Centre, he met Teng Yi who is on night shift and told him everything that happened. Teng Yi was relieved: "What a close call!"

He added: "We are too rigid and kept thinking that he will only attack us during the hunting fair. To think that he will use the Beauty Trap tonight. If we know more about the poison, we can trick them instead."

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "The poison will take effect after the fair." Teng Yi was stunned: "What makes you so sure?"

Xiang Shaolong explained; "Tu Xian informed me that Mo Ao has constructed a kind of tool that can kill underwater. It is meant for you and Jing Jun. When I die of poisoning later, there will be no one in Wu Family to counter them in the future."

Teng Yi was incensed: "If Mo Ao survives the hunting fair, I will change my surname to his."

Xiang Shaolong's expression darkened: "We have always been thinking about ourselves. If they planned to assassinate Lu Gong and Xu Xian too, it will be disastrous."

Teng Yi breathed out in shock: "Will Lu Buwei be so daring?"

Xiang Shaolong remarked: "Normally, he always play safe. But with the chaos caused by Lord Gaoling's rebellion, he can easily push the blame to him. With his devious scheming, this is an opportunity he will not bypass."

Thinking about this, he became impatient and stood up, declaring: "I need to see Lu Gong now and warn him."

Teng Yi suggested: "I think you should see Xu Xian instead. In terms of intelligence, Lu Gong is way behind him. If he believes us, they will take the appropriate countermeasures."

Xiang Shaolong found it reasonable and left the Command Centre under the escorts of the Eighteen Guardians and a few hundred Cavalry soldiers. Pretending to patrol the City, he rode towards Xu Xian's Left Premier Residence.

As the Imperial Cavalry Commander, he is responsible for all security matters in the City except for the palace.

As the dinner appointment ended early, it is only twelve plus now. Except for the brothel areas, the remaining streets are deserted except for the occasional horse carriage.

At the Left Premier Residence, Xu Xian met him in the inner hall. This famous Great General of Qin smiled: “I knew Shaolong would look for me before the hunting fair.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Why is Premier Xu so certain?”

Xu Xian sighed: “Since Mu Gong ruled Qin, we become a serious contender for power. Unfortunately, the roads to the east were heavily fortified by Jing so we focused on attacking the western lands. Finally, we conquered the other twelve states and gain plenty of territory. By the time Mu Gong passed away, we have amassed almost every piece of land on both sides of the Wei River. Since then, we did not conquer any new territories for over two hundred years. We can blame the enemy but it is actually our inability to overcome them. If you are powerful, who dare not succumb to you? It is as simple as that.”

Xiang Shaolong had no idea about history during those times and kept nodding his head.

Xu Xian became more enthusiastic and lectured: “When the eastern lands are divided, we should take the chance to attack them. It is a pity that the Qin court is in trouble and power was in the hands of evil ministers. Within forty years, we have a King who committed suicide, a Crown Prince denied of his succession, another King who was killed in the wilderness along with the Empress Dowager. Taking advantage of our internal strife, Wei invaded us and we lost all territories west of the river.”

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand Xu Xian’s mindset. Lu Buwei is

walking along the same old path. Whether Lu Buwei can control the Qin court or even remove Xiao Pan, ultimately, Qin cannot unite the world. This is Xu Xian's main concern.

Xu Xian stood up and mentioned in a deep voice: "Shaolong! Let's take a walk in the rear garden!"

Xiang Shaolong's goose pimples stood up and knew that he has something confidential to say to him.

Under the bright moonlight, the two men strolled slowly in the rear garden.

Xu Xian sighed: "We are just as barbaric as Rongdi and can be extremely stubborn. Xianyang City may be a beautiful city but it is just a nice cover for our rough ways. If the city is gone, you will see our uncivilised lifestyle and customs. Fortunately, Xiao Gong implemented Shang Yang's reforms and imposed harsh laws to make us learn how to respect rules. He built up our army and emphasized on military contributions that make us invincible wherever our armies go. Now, Lu Buwei entered the picture and kept promoting his own men. He even invited the inferior representatives from the six states to Qin, flattered them and secretly conspired with them. These actions are unfavourable to our state. I have read his Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu. Hng! If Shang Yang comes back to life, he will burn them at once."

Xiang Shaolong finally learnt about another set of thinking other than Lu Gong's Qin racism. It is a clash of culture. Lu Buwei has been too arrogant and did not consider the feelings of the Qin people.

The Qin people he met are honest, straightforward and do not employ schemes. Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang He, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu are all alike.

Lu Buwei, Mo Ao, Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai are all scheming people.

Qin's invincibility comes from their strong family relations coupled with Shang Yang's reforms.

Lu Buwei uses military men like Guan Zhongxie and Lu Xiong who are all his own subordinates. Moreover, Lu Xiong's denial of his wrongdoing is something Qin people detests the most.

Xiao Pan's strict punishment of Lu Xiong thus earned him the respect of the Qin people.

Xu Xian stopped walking and gazed at Xiang Shaolong before mentioning: "I am not against Lu Buwei because he is an outsider. Shang Yang is from Wei but he is someone I respect the most."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I understand Premier Xu's thinking."

Xu Xian shook his head and sighed: "Lu Buwei is too simple-minded. He thought that by poisoning the King, Qin will belong to him. Thankfully, Heaven has not abandoned us yet and gave us a capable ruler Crown Prince Zheng. Even at the sacrifice of my own life, I will ensure Crown Prince Zheng will be coroneted as the King of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked: “From Premier Xu’s words, our situation seems to be life-threatening.”

Xu Xian led him to sit down on some stones beside a small bridge and whispered: “Initially, I am not worried. But because of the uprising in the eastern provinces, Lu Buwei has sent Meng Ao, Wang He and all our nearby forces to crush the rebels. Now, there is only the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry protecting the capital. This is the most dangerous situation I have ever seen.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “From what I know, the uprising is a scheme by Lord Gaoling and Zhao General Pang Nuan. Didn’t Lu Buwei mention this?”

Xu Xian’s face become clouded and commented: “That’s true but we all know Lord Gaoling’s ability. Ten Lord Gaolings are still inferior to half a Lu Buwei. Lu Buwei is not someone who will be taken by surprise at the rebellion and send troops hastily to defend the provinces.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his body turning cold and softly asked: “Premier Xu is saying that...”

Xu Xian concluded: “This has something to do with Lu Buwei. As long as Lu Buwei can time this scheme with Lord Gaoling’s rebellion, he can control him like a puppet.”

Xu Xian’s face became more solemn and he added: “If Lu Buwei can kill you and your assistant Commanders, both Imperial Armies will land in his hands. What do you think will happen to Xianyang City? That is why I can guess that

you will visit me before the hunting fair. If you are really not Lu Buwei's lackey, you should sense something amiss with your level of intelligence. Does Shaolong understand?"

Xiang Shaolong has a second close shave. It is not easy to gain Xu Xian's trust. It is only until now that he fully believed that Xiang Shaolong is opposing Lu Buwei. He must be guarding against Lu Buwei's spying.

After an awkward silence, he replied: "Thanks for Premier Xu's trust."

He still has some doubts and asked: "Even if both armies belong to Lu Buwei, they will not necessary obey him if he wants to overthrow the Crown Prince."

Xu Xian sighed: "Shaolong is still inexperienced. Unless Lu Buwei has full control of the military, he will not dare to harm the Crown Prince. But if he can kill Lu Gong and me and push the entire blame to Lord Gaoling, he will control the Qin court. Meng Ao is his lackey and Wang He the foolish ass who dare not oppose him. With the Empress supporting him, there is nothing he dare not do."

His eyes flashed energetically and state: "He who acts first is in control; he who acts later is controlled."

As long as Lu Buwei is alive, everyone will suffer. The history of Qin will repeat as long as power is held in the hands of unscrupulous ministers.

Xiang Shaolong nearly groaned.

From Xu Xian's point of view, everything is well-analyzed and the strategies are appropriate.

However, Xiang Shaolong knew that before Xiao Pan's coronation, nobody could kill Lu Buwei.

If he cannot kill him, he will be killed. What kind of choice is this?

He hated himself for not being able to use this reason to persuade Xu Xian. How can he explain to Xu Xian that history books have recorded that Lu Buwei will live for several more years?

While he is agonizing, Xu Xian continued: "As long as Crown Prince nods his head, Lu Buwei will not survive these three days."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Has Premier Xu thought about the consequences?"

Xu Xian coldly snorted: "There are three obstacles. They are Empress Ji, Meng Ao and Du Bi. Du Bi is the biggest headache. With Lu Buwei gone, he will support Chongqiao to be the Crown Prince. If not for this consideration, Lu Gong and I would have acted when the late King passed away. Of course! Wang He has been dissuading us from doing this. Therefore, I hope you will persuade Crown Prince. You are, after all, the person he trusts the most."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "I have another plan in mind. First, we must conduct the blood test and prove that Crown Prince and Lu Buwei are not related at all. Secondly, we must kill Lu Buwei's top advisor. With this man gone, Lu Buwei is like a tiger without teeth and claws and his prowess will be

limited. Thirdly, we will...”

Xu Xian waved his hand and interrupted him: “Are you referring to Mo Ao?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Premier Xu has heard of this man?”

Xu Xian simply dismissed: “If I have never heard of him, how would I dare to oppose Lu Buwei? It will be great if we can kill Guan Zhongxie too.

Unfortunately, we are all guarding against each other secretly. If we openly fight, it will be hard to tell who the winner is.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that based on this point, he can still dissuade this clever man. He whispered: “Thirdly, we will support Lao Ai and use him to counter Lu Buwei. As long as we can drag everything until the coronation date, Lu Buwei will be the eventual loser.”

Xu Xian was blown away: “Isn’t Lao Ai a lackey of Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong revealed his whole scheme to him and added: “I even recommended Crown Prince to name Lu Buwei the Premier Mentor to curb his ambitions.”

Xu Xian inhaled a deep breath and stared at Xiang Shaolong as if this is the first time they met. Assessing him for a while, his eyes glowed and he remarked: “In terms of scheming, Mo Ao is inferior to you. No wonder you can still live healthily until today.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt guilty and smiled: “Luckily, I did not finish one

special cup of wine tonight or I would have failed your expectations.”

Xu Xian pressed for an explanation and he revealed everything that has happened.

After he finished listening, Xu Xian nodded in agreement: “You are right. If Mo Ao does not die, we will die under his hands one day. From my estimates, the poisoned wine will take effect after seven days. King Xiaowen drank Lu Buwei’s medicine and died from breathing difficulties seven days later. There has never been any poison that takes effect after seven days so even with our suspicions; there is no evidence to indicate Lu Buwei to be the mastermind. Ai! Now, nobody dares to eat food from Lu Buwei. It is really strange. The medication that King Xiaowen drank was also tested by an attendant. Why didn’t the attendant die of poisoning too?”

Xiang Shaolong had to admit that Mo Ao’s poisoning skills are many times better than the dead Zhao Mu. Even if it is a slow-reacting poison, there will still be traces of poisoning when the poison has entered the stomach. How can there be a poison that will only react seven days later? Even in the 21st century, it is still not possible. The only likelihood is that the poison is carefully wrapped in a special capsule. When the capsule is in the stomach, it will stay there for some time before it leaks the poison and take the life of the person.

Thinking about this, he was agitated. He wished he could immediately rush back to Drunken Wind Brothel and investigate the area where he spilled the poisonous wine and see if there is really such a capsule there.

Xu Xian noticed his countenance changing and implored: “What have you thought of?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “I am thinking of how to persuade Premier Xu to delay his plans to attack Lu Buwei.”

Xu Xian smiled: “I am not a brainless fighter. Since Shaolong has such a brilliant plan, Lu Gong and I will hold our plans back. But if you cannot kill Mo Ao, it will be our turn to attack Lu Buwei. It is better to die fighting for something you believe in than die an unexplainable death at home.”

Xiang Shaolong beat his chest and swore: “Give me ten days! I may be able to use his own poison against himself and let him die a mysterious death!” Surprised, Xu Xian stared at him speechlessly.

Chapter 02

Re-visiting The Brothel

Xiang Shaolong agilely leapt over the wall and landed in the garden of Drunken Wind Brothel.

It is two am in the morning and the several entertainment buildings behind the main building are still lighted and filled with sounds of music and singing.

Xiang Shaolong took some time before he could determine the exact building Guan Zhongxie had hosted him earlier. Strangely, the building is still lighted. Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, thinking that another batch of guests is now occupying their room.

Curious, he took advantage of the shadows of the trees and bushes to creep nearer to the building. As silent as a mouse, he finally reached the perimeter of the building and hurriedly prone down with his heart thumping wildly.

He was taken by surprise by several strongmen guarding the main door and he could recognize some of them to be Lu Buwei's personal escorts.

Is Lu Buwei here?

He peered harder into the darkness and noticed that the building was securely guarded by men in all four corners.

Of course, they do not pose an obstacle to an elite soldier like him who can climb walls and swing from buildings.

He scrutinized his surroundings and chose a tall tree besides the building. He stealthily shimmied up the tree and shot his grappling hook onto a roof tile. Once the rope is tightened, he carefully glided onto the roof and peeped into the building through one of the ventilation gaps.

He was so completely overwhelmed by what he saw that his body turned cold immediately and he nearly fell off the roof.

Under the illumination of the bright oil lamps, he saw Guan Zhongxie, Mo Ao, Brothel Owner Wu Fu, Guiyan and Dan Meimei analyzing the spilled wine under the table.

Wu Fu sighed: "Mister Mo is truly a genius. First, you advised me to use precious gifts to lower his guard; then we misled him that Meimei is going to poison him when the real culprit is Guiyan."

Guan Zhongxie commented: "I am full of respect for Brother Mo's abilities. Now, that kid thought that he had managed to escape our poisoning and will lower his guard. What a thrilling outcome!"

The main door opened and a delighted Lu Buwei strolled in arrogantly.

As Xiang Shaolong was totally flabbergasted at this revelation, Dan Meimei gracefully leaped into the arms of Lu Buwei and cooed: "Meimei has scored a huge merit for Premier Lu. How do you plan to reward me?"

Lu Buwei hugged her slender waist before patting her hips and laughed : “Fine! Then let me serve you in bed tonight!”

Mo Ao’s hand snaked out and embraced Guiyan, adding : “Premier must not forget our dear Guiyan. Without her skilful tongue, Xiang Shaolong will not be tricked.”

Above them, Xiang Shaolong was nearly fainting. How he wished he can jump straight down and slaughter all of them at once.

Heaven!

There is a poison pill in his stomach now. He had no knowledge of surgery and his death is imminent.

Still embracing Dan Meimei, Lu Buwei walked over to the spilled wine and took a closer look. He chortled : “Xiang Shaolong, even with your intelligence, you are only good enough to be my puppet. You made a mistake when you thought you have discarded the poisoned wine. When the poison takes effect, you will die an unexplainable death.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and saw a ray of hope.

If the pill is stuck in his throat, he can still survive.

Guan Zhongxie remarked : “Miss Meimei’s performance is brilliant. I am almost convinced by your acting too.”

Lu Buwei leaned forward and kissed her tightly on the lips, making her squirm and aroused.

Guan Zhongxie clapped Wu Fu's shoulder and smiled : "When everything is over, Boss Wu will surely be promoted to a high official post!"

Wu Fu gave his thanks and worriedly asked: "Is there a chance that he may spit the pill out?"

Leaning on Mo Ao, Guiyan assured : "Boss can put your mind at ease. The pill is very sticky and if not for his tongue entering my mouth, I will not be able to feed him the pill too."

Mo Ao revealed: "The weakness of the pill is that it sticks to the bottom of the wine cup. Otherwise, Little Yan need not feed him with your tongue and let him take advantage of you."

Guan Zhongxie laughed : "He only took a little advantage. The big advantage will be taken by you tonight!"

All the men laughed while the ladies protested.

Xiang Shaolong was in a state of panic. He could not wait to leave and remove the pill from his throat.

What an excellent plan! In the midst of all the kissing, he was intoxicated and did not realize that it was a kiss of death.

He was too careless and did not anticipate his opponent to guess that he knows Dan Meimei's background. His earlier antics looked so ridiculous now.

Lu Buwei smiled : "The night is painfully short. Mister Mo should retire to Guiyan's room and serve her well for her hard work."

He faced Wu Fu and added : "You have done well. I will see to your reward."

Laughing, he left with Dan Meimei still his in arms.

Xiang Shaolong groaned loudly.

From his open mouth, Teng Yi used a pair of bronze clippers to extract a black pill and put it on a plate. The pill is extremely small and it is about the size of a housefly.

Besides him, Tao Fang, Jing Jun, Pu Bu, Liu Chao, etc sighed with relief at the close shave.

Xiang Shaolong's throat was scrapped and he could not say anything for the time being.

Teng Yi raised the pill to eye level and everyone clustered around to have a closer look.

Jing Jun viciously demanded : "What can we do to put this pill in Mo Ao's throat?"

Xiang Shaolong cleared his throat and spoke in a hoarse voice: "If this pill is put in a wine cup, it will stick to the bottom. However, it did not happen to King Xiaowen's bowl of medicine."

Tao Fang happily exclaimed: "In this case, we can find out the recipe and use the same herbs but improve on its stickiness. Once we can make it stick only upon reaching the throat, it will be a piece of cake to kill Mo Ao. The recipe can be preserved for other uses too."

Teng Yi was shaken and glanced at Xiang Shaolong. They thought of Tu Xian and shook their heads at the same time.

If Tu Xian can poison Mo Ao without any difficulty, Mo Ao will be dead long ago.

Pu Bu interceded: "Even if we can improve the stickiness; it is still insufficient. How can we convince him to drink it in the first place?"

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "Let's act according to circumstances. I will carry the pill at all times and poison him whenever possible. It is late! Let's have some rest to have enough stamina to face Mo Ao's devilish schemes tomorrow. Second Brother and Little Jun must be especially alert."

Everyone agreed in unison and retired to their respective bedrooms.

Back at his own chamber, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Ji Yanran and his other pretty wives. Deep in thought, he was abruptly disturbed by a shrill voice: "Master is back!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around in surprise and saw Zhou Wei lying on one side of his bed. Her clothes are slightly ruffled and she must have been sleeping before he came into the room. Staring at her tempting figure, Xiang Shaolong was agonized.

Since the deaths of Zhao Qian and the maids, he was mentally tormented and spent a year in living hell. Moreover, he was discouraged at his lack of success in battling Lu Buwei. He no longer wished to add the burden of new relationships to his existing heavy load.

That is the same way he feels about Qin Qing and Ying Ying.

He may have promised the Changping Brothers to woo Ying Ying but it is an obligation and not resulting from his true passion. Additionally, he is not confident of winning her from Guan Zhongxie.

Presently, Zhou Wei is giving him the biggest headache.

From her characteristics, Xiang Shaolong deduced that she is a stubborn girl with plenty of self respect. She will either love him or hate him to the core.

Fortunately, their relationship is just starting out and he can still worm his way out. He coughed: "It is so late and you should go back to sleep."

Zhou Wei got up and paid her respects to him. She proceeded to gently undress his cloak and cheerfully replied: "I slept already and am very energetic now. Master Tao has assigned a rear room for me. Shall I help you take a shower?" By the time she finished speaking, her two cheeks have

turned completely red.

Xiang Shaolong lamented secretly that he is truly lacking the company of his wives and his earlier brothel experience has aroused his sexual desire. If he agrees to her company, he will have to bear with the consequences. But if he rejects her, would she be extremely offended?

Luckily, just as Zhou Wei is beginning to undress him further, footsteps were heard.

Astounded, Xiang Shaolong turned his head and saw Jing Jun. Stunned, he exclaimed: "Little Jun! What is so urgent?"

Jing Jun is still under the impression that Zhou Wei is Zhou Liang's wife and stared at her suspiciously.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Zhou Wei to retreat into her own room and asked again: "What is going on?"

Jing Jun watched Zhou Wei as she left and inquired: "What is she doing here?"

Xiang Shaolong explained their sibling relationship and Jing Jun eyes lit up and sighed: "Third Brother is a blessed man. If she dresses up and apply make-up, her beauty will surpass the Tian sisters."

Xiang Shaolong was inspired and asked Jing Jun to take a seat before smiling: "Is Little Jun interested in her?"

Jing Jun seriously answered: "Third Brother must be kidding. I will not dare to compete with you for her affections."

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: "She is not my woman yet. If you are keen, you can try wooing her. I do not mind at all but instead will be grateful towards you!"

Jing Jun was overjoyed: "Hei! I shall give it a try! I am much better with girls now."

Xiang Shaolong decided: "It is settled then. Why are you not sleeping and came all the way here to look for me?"

Jing Jun enquired: "Can Third Brother participate in an expedition with your injured leg?"

Xiang Shaolong responded: "As long as it is not a fight, I should be fine. What bright ideas do you have?"

Jing Jun whispered: "There is four hours from now till daybreak. If we want to kill Mo Ao, this is the best opportunity."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Mo Ao is heavily protected with his own escorts in addition to Lu Buwei's escorts. How can we kill him?"

Jing Jun detailed: "Of course we cannot resort to force. I am familiar with Drunken Wind Brothel's layout and I know the location of the bedrooms of Dan Meimei and Guiyan. If we can slip in and force the pill down Mo Ao's

throat, we can turn the tables and wait for him to die an unexplainable death. Wouldn't that be great?" Xiang Shaolong excitedly cried: "What's the plan?"

Jing Jun opened his palm and displayed a twig that was about three inches long. He proudly proclaimed: "This is a twig from the tree of slumber. When it is lighted, anyone who breathes in the fumes will start to fall asleep. Anyone already asleep will fall into deeper sleep that he will not be awakened even if he is being slapped. Does Third Brother understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong thought it over and agreed: "You better inform Second Brother. If we leave him out of this fun, he will give us a terrible scolding."

With their climbing skills, the three brothers slipped into the Drunken Wind Brothel noiselessly and hid within the vegetation.

Beyond the trees, bright lights can still be seen.

The experienced Jing Jun explained: "There are four chambers in the building within the bamboo clusters ahead. They house the four great beauties of Drunken Wind Brothel who are Dan Meimei, Yang Yu, Guiyan and Bailei. Guiyan's chamber is the left one at the back of the building. Once we can get through the bamboo plants, there is a chance we can slip inside. If I remember correctly, there are some cinnamon trees near the building which is a good place to hide."

Teng Yi frowned: "If Lu Buwei is in there too, security will be extra tight. A cluster of bamboo plants is harder to infiltrate compared to normal trees. If

there is someone guarding the entrances and exits of the bamboo clusters, how can we slip in?"

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is there another alternative?"

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: "It is completely surrounded by bamboo and thus, it is named the Secret Bamboo Rendezvous. Once we can pass the obstacle, Mo Ao is as good as dead."

Footsteps can be heard as two family warriors walked towards them. They seemed to be leading the way with the lanterns they carried and were chatting happily. The three men quietened down and strained their ears to eavesdrop on their conversation.

The first man started: "The four great beauties truly live up to their reputations. Even our Master Guan is tempted and is spending the night in Yang Yu's room."

The second man replied: "I heard the last one is Bailei. I wonder if she has an overnight guest. If not, we can have some fun with her."

The first man sighed: "Can you afford her? I heard that she may not even accompany you even if you have money."

When they have travelled out of earshot, Xiang Shaolong was inspired and revealed: "Bailei should be accompanying Han Chuang. We can use him to pass through the bamboo clusters."

Before he could finish speaking, a group of people are walking towards them from another building. Han Chuang and Bailei could be seen among them. Teng Yi anxiously exclaimed: "How can we avoid being identified by Bailei?"

This group of people has walked down a garden path and is led by two pretty maids carrying lanterns. Behind the maids are four of Han Chuang's family warriors, followed by the lecherous Han Chuang caressing and hugging Bailei. Behind them are another eight personal escorts.

Witnessing this, Xiang Shaolong was at a loss.

Jing Jun suddenly whispered to Teng Yi: "Bailei does not know who you are!"

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: "Second Brother can masquerade as Prince Dan's subordinate. Han Chuang just had a drink with him."

By now, Han Chuang's party has walked past their hiding place and are walking down the straight path leading into the bamboo clusters.

Teng Yi removed his sword and gathered his courage. He rushed out to the path and hailed: "Marquis, please hold your step. Prince Dan has instructed me to pass you a message."

Han Chuang's party stopped walking and the personal escorts revealed a threatening look on their faces.

Teng Yi strode towards him. Although he is unarmed, everyone stared at him with suspicions and their hands are on their sword hilts.

Han Chuang released Bailei from his hold and coldly snorted: “What does Prince Dan wants to say to me?”

Teng Yi knew that Han Chuang’s men will not allow him to get close to their master. He stopped walking and bowed: “I am Prince Dan’s Right General Long Shan. Has Marquis Han forgotten about me already?”

Long Shan is Teng Yi’s fictitious name during their Handan City mission.

Han Chuang was stunned for a while and came to realize the hidden meaning. He laughed: “Yes! Yes! I remember you! General, please forgive me for not recognizing you earlier in the dim environment.”

He faced Bailei and ordered: “Please return to your room first. I will join you shortly.”

Bailei is not the least suspicious. She reminded Han Chuang to be quick and sauntered off.

Under Han Chuang’s cover, the three men disguised as his followers and passed through the heavily-fortified bamboo clusters safely. They arrived at a cinnamon tree which separates Guiyan’s chamber from Bailei’s chamber.

Han Chuang winked at them and began to climb the stairs.

Two of Bailei’s maids stepped forward to entertain them.

Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and Teng Yi are afraid to be recognized by the

maids. They had made earlier arrangements with the other subordinates of Han Chuang. Two of the escorts hurriedly dragged the two maids into another room and love-making sounds can be heard after a short while.

With the other escorts acting as a lookout, the three men climbed up the cinnamon tree and reached the roof of Guiyan's chamber.

Sounds of snoring can be heard from within.

Jing Jun is the most agile among them. He slipped into the room via a window and Mo Ao's snoring is replaced by sounds of heaving breathing. Xiang Shaolong signalled Teng Yi to stay on the roof while he somersaulted into the room.

Jing Jun was squatting beside the bed and signalled that everything is under control.

Xiang Shaolong was delighted and joined him.

With an oil lamp providing some light, Jing Jun has forced opened Mo Ao's mouth. Xiang Shaolong quickly retrieved the poison pill and used the bronze clippers to insert it into his throat. When the pill is securely stuck in place, they tried to leave but were interrupted by footsteps outside the door.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were terrified. They stepped over the two sleeping bodies and hid themselves in a dark corner between the bed and the wall.

Heavy knocking is heard and a man shouted from outside: “Master Mo! Premier Lu is looking for you.” Mo Ao and Guiyan naturally did not respond.

Xiang Shaolong knows about the workings of the human anatomy. He pinched Mo Ao heavily at the base of his foot.

Fortunately, Jing Jun did not use a heavy dose of the slumber fumes. Awakened by the sharp pain, Mo Ao was roused from his sleep.

The man shouted again: “Master Mo!”

Mo Ao was in a daze as he just woke up. “What is going on?” He shouted back.

The man replied: “Premier Lu has received urgent news and is waiting downstairs for Master Mo. Ai! Even Master Guan is waiting too.”

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were horrified. If Mo Ao notices them, they will be doomed.

Suddenly, Lu Buwei’s voice is heard outside the door: “We are waiting for you at the external hall.”

Mo Ao shoved Guiyan but she did not respond. He pinched her white breasts for some time before putting on his clothes and casually stepping out of the room.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were elated. They quickly trailed him and

eavesdropped outside the room.

Lu Buwei began: "I just got word that the short-lived Xiang Shaolong went to find Xu Xian and they chatted for two hours before he returned back to the Wu Residence. Hng! Does Mister Mo think they will try any tricks?"

Mo Ao is still under the effects of the slumber fumes and his head is still spinning. He remarked: "I think I drank too much and my head is in pain."

Guan Zhongxie advised: "Brother Mo should drink some tea to calm your nerves."

Sounds of water pouring and drinking can be heard. From the sounds he heard, Xiang Shaolong deduced that only Lu Buwei, Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie are present.

After some time, Lu Buwei questioned: "Is Mister Mo confident that the poison will act up on the last day of the hunting fair? Without the rebellion of Lord Gaoling, we will be the chief suspect if he dies."

Mo Ao took a deep breath and replied: "Premier Lu can put your mind at ease. I have tried the same poison on several other men and I am confident of the timing."

Guan Zhongxie smiled: "Without Xiang Shaolong, they will be in chaos. We are well-prepared to send the Crown Prince and Empress over the river first. When it is Lu Gong and Xu Xian's turn, we will make the bridge collapse and assassinate them underwater. It will be a clean job and no one will suspect

us.”

Lu Buwei brought up: “I am concerned that Xiang Shaolong and Xu Xian will act first in the first two days. When that happens, we will be at a disadvantage.”

Mo Ao confidently assured: “Relax! As long as they are not sure about Lord Gaoling’s ambush, they will not attack us and make it easy for Lord Gaoling. I doubt they have the guts anyway.”

Lu Buwei sighed: “The Crown Prince is another issue. He still does not know he is my own flesh and blood. Ai! It is all because of that b1tch Zhu Ji. I have told her numerous times to clarify this with him but she flatly refuses. She is also unwilling to make me the Regent of Qin. Hng! Lao Ai is such a useless bum.”

Guan Zhongxie suggested: “I think Xiang Shaolong is the main reason that Empress does not fully submit to Premier.”

Mo Ao sniggered: “I have a secret plan to make her happy and make you the Regent at the same time.”

The two eavesdroppers Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun were excited and curious to know about his plan. At the same time, they have to admire Mo Ao’s quick thinking.

Lu Buwei was pleased and asked for the details.

Mo Ao smiled: "You must let Empress feel that you and Xiang Shaolong are no longer enemies to make her submit fully to you."

Guan Zhongxie was slightly irritated: "Is Brother Mo suggesting that we let Lu Niang Rong marry him!"

Mo Ao smiled: "Don't tell me Brother Guan is jealous of a man with only three days left to live!"

Mo Ao explained in a low voice: "Premier Lu can invite Empress to announce the wedding plans for Third Mistress and Xiang Shaolong. At the same time, to promote Premier to Regent. When these two matters are carried out together, it indicates that if Empress allows Premier to be promoted, Premier will sacrifice his favourite daughter to guarantee the safety of Xiang Shaolong. In these circumstances, Empress will relent in order to protect Xiang Shaolong. Of course, Lao Ai needs to put in some effort too."

Xiang Shaolong has no idea what is the difference between a Regent and a Prime Minister but it should be a post of authority that will slowly diminish Xiao Pan's right of rule.

Guan Zhongxie did not object any further.

Lu Buwei cheered: "This is a brilliant plan. Zhongxie! I have to bother you to persuade Niang Rong! She only listens to you. When she pretended to kick up a fuss as you instructed, even Xiang Shaolong was fooled."

Xiang Shaolong realised that Lu Niang Rong's tantrum and marriage rejection

was all a ploy and could not help but feel extremely hateful.

Since she is such a vicious woman, he need not show her any mercy or pity in the future.

As Jing Jun suggested, he should toy with her and it is as good as delivering a blow to Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei concluded: "So it shall be decided then. The sky is brightening soon!"

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun dared not loiter any further and slipped away in the blink of an eye.

Under such unexpected circumstances, they actually managed to gather such crucial intelligence. Now, the game will be played differently.

Chapter 03

The Great Hunting Fair

Before dawn, an exhausted Han Chuang had to drag his tired body out of bed to escort Xiang Shaolong and his brothers to leave the brothel safely.

When they reached the streets, they parted immediately to avoid suspicions.

Back at the Wu Residence, the sky is beginning to brighten. The three men hurriedly changed their clothes and while Teng Yi and Jing Jun set off to the Command Centre to see to the hunting fair, Xiang Shaolong made his way to the palace.

He ran into Xu Xian's convoy and was invited to join him in the horse carriage. Lu Gong is in the carriage too and they were discussing on how to counter Lu Buwei's schemes. Although they are fully dressed in hunting clothes, they do not seem enthusiastic about the hunting fair at all.

Lu Gong noticed that his eyes are red because he did not sleep a wink last night. He nodded: "It must be hard on you."

Xiang Shaolong was glad: "My body may be tired but I am in a great mood."

Xu Xian was stunned: "Shaolong has such a confident expression. Have there been any new developments?"

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice and revealed his two adventures to Drunken Wind Brothel, including the eavesdropping of Lu Buwei's secret meeting.

Both listeners cheered at his accomplishment.

Lu Gong slapped his thigh with delight and cried: "Even the poison pill can be extracted from Shaolong's throat. This shows that Heaven is on our side."

Xu Xian decided: "Since this is the case, we shall adhere to Shaolong's suggestion and use Lao Ai against Lu Buwei. Actually, Lu Buwei is quite a good administrator. Let's give him a few years of peace. When our Crown Prince is coroneted, that will be the end of him."

Lu Gong agreed: "In the meantime, we will hold on to our military authority and cultivate good leaders. When it is time to act, we will be more than prepared."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "I have a good man to recommend and it is none other than Wang Jian..."

Xu Xian laughed and interrupted him: "Thanks for your reminder and in fact, we have noticed him as a potential leader as well. Let's give him more time to fine tune his skills! Ai! Wang Chi is getting senile and it will soon be time for his son to succeed him."

Lu Gong is now in a good mood and laughed: "Is Shaolong ready to marry Lu Niang Rong while annoying Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled back: “I think this will in return give them a big headache.”

Xu Xian mused: “But as the Regent of Qin, his authority will be beyond question and he will be like the acting King. Without his approval, no royal order can be issued.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Does Premier Xu recall my suggestion about the Premier Mentor? We can use this official post to humour Lu Buwei first. When Mo Ao dies three days later, he will be at a loss. By that time, Lao Ai will be promoted to be the Inner Custodian and it will be too late for Lu Buwei to object.”

By now, the convoy is entering the palace and all the three men are in great spirits. They cannot wait for the three days to quickly pass and witness the retribution of these evil men.

Xiang Shaolong’s anxious mind has been replaced by a new relaxing mood. Amazing!

In the next few days, he will amuse himself with these evil men and even Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying will not be let off. After all, what is life without some fun!

The palace courtyard is filled with men and horses assembled for the hunting fair.

The participating hunters are either from the royal family, high ranking

officials or the representatives of various departments. Everyone is dressed in light hunting clothes and mounted on their horses under their respective banners. Altogether, it was an impressive display of five thousand gallant men and stunning beauties.

Ten thousand Palace guards are protecting the Imperial Convoy on both sides as they prepared to move to the hunting grounds.

Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and Guan Zhongxie are fully occupied with managing the deployment of their men as well as maintaining law and order.

Xiang Shaolong left the carriage and mounted Jifeng. Leading his Eighteen Guardians leisurely, he soaked himself in the festive atmosphere.

One of the banners is embroidered with the word 'Qi' which reminded Xiang Shaolong of 'his old friend' Tian Dan. He was amused as Lu Buwei would have told Tian Dan about his impending death. Thus, Tian Dan would be delighted and complacent, making it easier for Xiang Shaolong to assassinate him.

Xu Xian, Lu Buwei, Lu Gong and the other high ranking officials are lined up in two rows in front of the inspection platform. Guests like Tian Dan and Prince Dan are based further away. Han Chuang is apparently absent and he must have returned home to Han.

The most outstanding are the Female Warriors led by Ying Ying. Over a hundred young ladies dressed elaborately in their hunting outfits stood out from the crowd of mostly men. They bantered noisily with the young men besides them and added some liveliness to the situation.

However, the group that gained everyone's attention are his own wives and Qin Qing. They did not have any banner but just stood on one side under the protection of their family warriors. Everyone near and far strained their eyes and their necks to catch a glimpse of their beauty.

Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are beyond comparison; Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi are rare beauties themselves and the loving twin sisters Tian Zhen and Tian Feng only cause everyone to be intoxicated with their charm and elegance.

Xiang Shaolong could not resist and rode up to them, smiling: "Which department do you girls represent?"

All the girls giggled with pleasure.

Qin Qing coldly state: "Empress has specially instructed us to accompany her for the next three days for the hunt. I think we belong to her department."

From her cold expression, Xiang Shaolong deduced that she must be bearing grudges at him for taking advantage of her and is now viewing him with suspicions. Sighing secretly, he smiled weakly and did not reply. Facing Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, he questioned: "Where is Bao'er?"

Wu Tingfang is so excited that her face is totally red. She cooed: "I wanted to bring him to the hunt but is concerned that he may catch a cold. I have left with at the Qin Residence under the care of the nanny."

Zhao Zhi exclaimed: "Hubby! Shall I introduce you to our two new nannies?"

Behind her, the Tian sisters' faces begin to burn like fire. Embarrassed, they were did not know where to hide when Wu Tingfang whispered: "Hubby! Can you come to our tent tonight? We missed you greatly!" Xiang Shaolong was tempted at her offer and hurriedly agreed.

Sounds of drumbeats can be heard as Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji ascended the inspection platform under the escort of the palace guards.

Everyone paid their respects and proclaimed their loyalty to them.

The hunting fair has finally begun!

The hunting teams stretched out over ten miles and it was a grand display of power.

The cavalry army is standing guard at the boundaries of the hunting grounds and security is extremely tight.

To show off the might of Qin, Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji rode on a horse each towards the hunting grounds. They were accompanied by Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang Wan, Cai Ze, other important officials as well as the palace guards.

Xiang Shaolong was riding with Wu Tingfang and his wives when Li Si trailed behind the main group and came to find him. They left the official roads and rode on the byways.

Li Si whispered: "Whenever I saw Grand Tutor Qin, I always feel that she is

more enthralling than Talented Lady Ji; but whenever I saw Talented Lady Ji, I feel that Qin Qing is inferior to her. Now that I have seen both of them side by side, I finally understood that they are both without equal and are attractive in their own ways.”

Xiang Shaolong observed: “Brother Li is in great spirits today!”

Li Si shook his head: “I am appearing joyful despite my difficulties! The hunting fair is fraught with dangers and how can I be happy?”

Carefully assessing Xiang Shaolong’s expression, he continued: “Brother Xiang must have a terrible night’s sleep. Your eyes are bloodshot and your voice is hoarse. I am worried for you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I did not even sleep; so how can my sleep be bad? Regarding my throat, it was scrapped. If not for this throat injury, I may be dead.” He proceeded to divulge everything that that has transpired last night.

Li Si was totally blown away and excitedly exclaimed: “I must report this to the Crown Prince. Ai! I am more and more impressed with Brother Xiang’s abilities.”

He added: “No wonder Lu Buwei had earlier suggested marrying his daughter to Brother Xiang and petitioned Empress and Crown Prince to represent his wishes. Empress is naturally delighted but Crown Prince and I were puzzled. So this is the real motive behind his intention. Hei! Is Brother Xiang going to reject his marriage proposal?”

Xiang Shaolong returned his question with his own question: “Do you think I will?”

Both men looked at each other and broke out into laughter.

Li Si remarked: “It is a Qin custom to announce important policies or promote officials during the hunting fair. Brother Xiang’s suggestion to make Lu Buwei the Premier Mentor is a wonderful suggestion. It will keep him guessing and curb his ambitions. The Crown Prince will use this idea if the Empress tries to force him to promote Lu Buwei again.”

Xiang Shaolong noticed Guan Zhongxie riding towards them from the corner of his eye and hurriedly changed the topic to some irrelevant issues.

Guan Zhongxie may be up the whole night but he is much more rejuvenated than Xiang Shaolong and approached them energetically. He greeted Li Si: “Since Official Li has entered the palace to serve the Crown Prince, we did not have much time to catch up. We should spend more time together during these three days.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. He realised that Lu Buwei may even try to replace Li Si with Mo Ao to fully control Xiao Pan. Li Si must be the next person on Lu Buwei’s hit list. Why didn’t he think of this earlier?

At the end of the day, he lacked a clever advisor like Mo Ao or Li Si to assist him.

Li Si is the best candidate but he needs to focus on helping Xiao Pan and

cannot be available to him. He recalled that he had Ji Yanran and cursed himself for not making use of his clever wife's intelligence.

Guan Zhongxie's voice sounded out beside him: "Why is Official Xiang so melancholic?"

Xiang Shaolong decided to play a trick on him and winked at Li Si, saying: "Can I have a private word with you?"

Li Si understood his intention and bade farewell. He rode ahead and rejoined the main group.

Guan Zhongxie was startled: "What does Official Xiang want to tell me?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Official Li told me earlier that Premier Lu has the intention to marry Third Mistress to me and it may be announced tomorrow. Honestly speaking, I know that Third Mistress is in love with Brother Guan instead! No matter where we stand, I am full of admiration for Brother Guan's character and sword skills. Even if we are on opposing sides, this is a love matter and not a manly fight. As long as you say the word, I will speak to Empress and Crown Prince immediately and not spoil Third Mistress's chastity."

Guan Zhongxie's eyes were originally shining sharply but after hearing his words, his expression became mixed.

Xiang Shaolong was impressed. Guan Zhongxie could easily deny everything and no one will be the wiser. But this will also indicate that he is a cowardly

liar.

Given the unique circumstances, no one else can understand their awkward positions.

In actual fact, they are out to kill each other but are doing it secretly.

In the eyes of Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong is nearly a dead man who still thinks he escaped the poisoning. With his upfront attitude, he is obviously not out to take advantage of Lu Niang Rong. From this, it shows that Xiang Shaolong is an honourable man who will not take revenge for the poisoning by seducing Lu Niang Rong. He was a true gentleman.

Xiang Shaolong is secretly laughing and patiently waited for his response.

Guan Zhongxie suddenly smiled bitterly: "I will not lie to you but Third Mistress's marriage is something beyond my control and I should not come between two of you. In life, you win some and you lose some. That's a fact. Third Mistress is no longer young but is still a wilful girl. I am sure you can still be a good and fitting husband. Official Xiang should not worry about this anymore."

Finishing, he rode off.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Tu Xian is right about Guan Zhongxie being an asshole. Even to a dying man, he is still faking his words. What a despicable cad!

But this is what he expected. When he did not die three days later, Lu Niang Rong will become his fiancé and it is due to Guan Zhongxie's own arrangement. This will cause him great regrets and deal a blow to his pride.

In the past, he seduced Wu Tingfang and Zhao Ya from Lian Jin, making him lose his rationality and cause him to be defeated by himself.

Coincidentally, the same scenario is repeated on Guan Zhongxie.

What will he do when he loses his rationality?

Thinking about this, he quickly caught up to Ji Yanran and wanted to consult her.

Qin Qing, Ji Yanran and the other girls are travelling with Empress Zhu Ji and were chatting happily. Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and the rest are travelling in front of them.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid to see Zhu Ji and stayed at the back, trying to find an opportunity to isolate Yanran.

Someone shouted: "Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head around and saw Lao Ai leaving his group and riding towards him. He greeted him respectfully when he reached his side.

Xiang Shaolong returned his greetings and praised: "Official Lao is looking great! Life must be good in the palace."

Lao Ai lowered his voice: "It is all thanks to Official Xiang's recommendation. Even the Crown Prince said the same thing." He happily added: "During the hunting fair, the Crown Prince will officially promote me to be the Inner Custodian. Soon, we will have plenty of opportunities to work together!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel that his thanks are sincere. For Lao Ai, he will be grateful to whoever that can bring him more wealth and authority. He used to obey Lu Buwei as he is looking for employment. Now, this unscrupulous and selfish man will forsake Lu Buwei for greater benefits.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a low voice: "Does Premier Lu know about this?"

Lao Ai angrily swore: "He only knew about it yesterday and threw his temper at Empress. Fortunately, Empress rebutted him."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised: "Brother Lao is being promoted and enjoying a life of luxury. He should be happy for you but why is he opposing instead?"

Lao Ai viciously hissed: "He naturally will not say that he opposes my promotion but he insisted that I am a criminal and should not be promoted or tongues will wag. Hei! Ultimately, he wants to keep me as a lowly servant forever."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly glad that Lao Ai and Lu Buwei are now openly on opposing sides. He officially state: "Brother Lao can put your mind at ease. I have spoken to Premier Xu and Lieutenant General Lu. They will support Brother Lao for sure."

Lao Ai was flabbergasted: “Hei! This... This...” He was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong tried to control his laughter and strongly affirmed: “Lu Buwei is a b@sterd. The higher your rank, the more jealous he is of you. But Brother Lao can relax. As long as I am in his way, you will be safe.” Lao Ai trembled and his expression grew serious.

At this point, Tian Zhen noticed him and slowed down to join him.

Xiang Shaolong patted Lao Ai’s shoulder and rode ahead to join her.

The battle of Lao Ai and Lu Buwei is about to begin!

Chapter 04

The Incredible Talented Lady Ji

An endless sea of tents and flags can be seen west of the River Jing.

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters are situated on a little hill near the royal tent. They were observing all the excitement happening below them.

It may not be a real battle but the military movements are precise and according to the military law.

Among the seven states, Qin has the heaviest emphasis on military contributions. Every young child would have learnt some form of martial arts and everyone is somewhat familiar with military formations.

Since the terrain is wide grassland with no cover, a square campsite has been laid out.

Xiao Pan's tent is situated in the centre of the defending gates and is akin to a military command centre. Within the gates are about twenty tents which belong to the royal family and others like Qin Qing who share a special relationship with the rulers of Qin.

On the two sides of the defending gates are two defending armies of palace guards led by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen respectively. Xiao Pan has

direct control over the army to safeguard his own safety.

The other soldiers are based in all four directions and act as defenders. Xiang Shaolong's cavalry army is based far away and is protecting the entire camp from their location. If necessary, they can act as a vanguard or a distraction to a potential enemy.

Besides the main tents, the other tents are in groups of ten and the space between them is wide enough for eight horses to travel side by side.

There are some dedicated areas with stables and target boards for hunters to practise their shooting skills, riding skills and even sword skills. These areas are especially crowded like a festive parade.

It is now four hours away from the evening hunt and everyone is enthusiastically assembled at the main assembly ground and challenging one another.

The main assembly ground near the royal tent has become the playground for Ying Ying and her female warriors. Young men keen to woo these stubborn Qin ladies are all gathering around the area for their chance to interact with them. Thus, this area is much livelier than the others.

Sounds of horses braying and people talking filled the air.

The strong wind began to blow and the flags unfurled majestically, adding to the grandeur of the hunting fair.

Ji Yanran has been updated on everything that has happened and smiled: “When Lord Gaoling is about to attack, he will first set fire to the tents furthest away from the royal tents and the river. Since it is now blowing the southeast wind, the fire will spread towards us and we can only escape by crossing the river and hiding at the north shore of River Jing.”

Xiang Shaolong and the ladies turned their attention to the two wooden bridges and were shocked. If the two bridges are destroyed, the consequences will be unimaginable.

Even if the two bridges are intact, they cannot support some many people crossing. Those who are unable to cross the bridge will have to swim over. During the chaos, it will be an easy feat for Lu Buwei to carry out his assassination.

He recalled that Guan Zhongxie will ‘heroically’ escort Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan across the river to safety while he will ‘die of poisoning’ and Guan Zhongxie will ‘score a huge merit’. Mo Ao’s devious scheme is indeed a brilliant strategy.

Rainfall is scarce and a fire attack is hard to prevent. Moreover, Lord Gaoling is familiar with the tents and in fact, his own tent is located at the southeast part of the campsite. He can easily set fire as Ji Yanran predicted.

In addition, during the night hunt, every hunter would be busy in the west forests and their defences will be lacking. That would be the ideal time to ambush the Crown Prince and Zhu Ji.

If the Lord Changping brothers are killed in battle, it is possible that Lu Buwei can insert his own subordinates to replace them as head of the palace guards.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and remarked: “Yanran is amazing and can predict Lord Gaoling’s ambush like a fortune teller. Therefore, we must pay close attention to the southeast tents. The moment Lord Gaoling’s men or Lu Buwei’s men tried to bring flammable materials to that area, we will know when they will strike.”

Ji Yanran was overjoyed at his praise and smiled sweetly back at him.

Hoof beats can be heard as Lord Changwen rode up to him and cried: “Let’s ride our horses to the assembly ground to join in the fun!”

The ladies turned around to face him and he jealously stared at Ji Yanran and the girls with an intoxicated look on his face. He sighed: “Good evening ladies. Ai! I am so envious of Shaolong’s good fortune.”

Wu Tingfang chortled and smiled prettily, asking: “Has Lord Changwen finished his duties?”

Lord Changwen put on a busy expression and reported: “Empress and Crown Prince have settled down and Grand Tutor Qin is chatting with the Empress now. I was ordered to inform you ladies about this.”

Xiang Shaolong yawned: “You go ahead and have fun! I wished to catch some sleep in my tent.”

Lord Changwen burst out laughing and rode ahead between Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran. As he rode past Xiang Shaolong, he grabbed onto his horse's reins and dragged him down the slope, shouting to the ladies: "We are going to have some fun!"

The ladies saw Xiang Shaolong helplessly being dragged down the hill and giggled with laughter. They then chased them down the slope.

Sou! Three arrows were shot out in succession and all three hit the bull's eye of a target three hundred feet away. The observers cheered and clapped loudly.

The archer Ying Ying proudly scanned her audience and cried: "Who else is next?"

The various men may be itching to try but with this beauty challenging them, they are afraid to lose face if they failed to better her record. For some time, no one dared to accept her challenge.

Guan Zhongxie laughed: "Our best shooter among the female warriors is invincible. Of course no one dares to accept her challenge."

Ying Ying was delighted at his praise and shot him a lovely glance. The other men were jealous but still did not have the courage to give it a try.

Xiang Shaolong dismounted from his horse and was stunned at Ying Ying's archery skills. He can hit the bull's eye with one arrow but definitely not with three arrows in succession. No wonder Ying Ying is so arrogant.

When the female warriors noticed Xiang Shaolong, every one of them had a look of displeasure on their faces but when they saw Ji Yanran, their expressions became envious.

Lu Dan'er stepped out from the crowd and jeered: "Has Commander Xiang recovered from his leg injury? I heard that you are unbeatable in parrying arrows with your sword but I wonder how good are your archery skills?"

Nearly a thousand pair of eyes looked at Xiang Shaolong before shifting over to Ji Yanran.

Ji Yanran naturally knew the level her husband's archery skill and recognizes that the people of Qin values martial talent. If Xiang Shaolong refuses to participate because of his injury, he will be ridiculed by the people of Qin. Grinning, she took off her cloak and revealed a figure-hugging white suit. She gracefully stepped forward and asked in her sweet voice: "Can I give it a try?" Her casual demeanour and alluring disposition caused everyone present to be mesmerized by her.

When she finished speaking, everyone cheered at her decision and her attractive and athletic display.

Ying Ying shot a vicious look at Ji Yanran before she reluctantly stretched out to pass her the bow.

Ji Yanran noticed that Ying Ying is standing using the horse stance and guessed that she wanted to play a trick on her. Out of a sudden, she grabbed onto the end of the bow and applied downward pressure. Before Ying Ying

could retaliate, the bow has been pried from her hands into the hands of the maiden who is even prettier than herself.

Even Guan Zhongxie was taken aback.

Standing besides Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changwen whispered: "It is good to curb that arrogant sister of mine!"

Ying Ying did not anticipate Ji Yanran to see through her trick and dejectedly returned to Lu Dan'er's side.

Two cavalry soldiers happily stepped forward and presented three arrows to Ji Yanran.

Ji Yanran pretended that everything is the same and leisurely fitted the arrows to her bow while maintaining that sweet smile on her face.

The crowd quietened down.

In a whirl of actions, Ji Yanran fired three arrows one after another while the crowd stared with their mouths wide open. Her arrows shot forward like shooting stars.

She fired her first arrow with her back to the target board and her second arrow with a backhand. It was only until the final arrow did she face the target board properly.

Zng! The first arrow hit the bull's eye while the second arrow split the first

arrow into two and the final arrow split the second arrow into two. It was as if she is the Goddess of Archery. No one could believe their eyes. Without question, her archery skill is way above Ying Ying's.

The crowd burst out into wild cheering which lasted for some time.

Ji Yanran is furious at Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er for 'bullying' her husband and did not even spare them a single glance. She curtsied to the crowd and left without a word.

Xiang Shaolong can tell that their 'hatred' is becoming more intense.

An escort came to report that the Crown Prince is looking for him.

As he crossed past the wooden defending gates, he noticed a group of female warriors are riding behind him. Taking a closer look, he realised that it is Lu Niang Rong and her female escorts.

When Lu Niang Rong saw him, she has a mixed expression on her face. She curled up her mouth proudly and whipped her horse, cruising past Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong detests her.

Knowing that he is poisoned, she did not show the slightest pity. Like father, like daughter. She is an evil woman just like her father Lu Buwei.

Hng!

She will get her just deserts later.

The open space in front of the main royal tent is filled with loud cheering. It appears that Xiao Pan is practicing his archery while Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Lord Changping and the other officials are cheering him on.

Li Si caught sight of him and moved to welcome him. "It is time!" he whispered.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Li Si is referring to the blood test. From Li Si's anxious expression, Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is worried about the test results. If Xiao Pan is Lu Buwei's son, it would be disastrous.

Xiang Shaolong squeezed to where Lu Gong and Xu Xian were standing and took out the special needle while winking at them.

Both men started to breathe heavily.

Xiao Pan has shot ten arrows with four hitting the bull's eye and the remaining near the bull's eyes. This has surpassed his usual record and no wonder the officials are so happy for him. As long as he manages to hit the target board, it is enough to make the crowd go wild.

As Wang Ben delivered another arrow to him, Xiao Pan detected Xiang Shaolong among the crowd. He turned over and raised his bow, exclaiming happily: "Grand Tutor! My archery skill has improved!"

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he is providing an opportunity for him to draw

his blood. He greeted him and advised: “If Crown Prince uses less of his eyes and more of his hands, your results will improve dramatically.”

Xiao Pan was surprised: “Archery is all about eyesight. What is the hand used for?”

Everyone including Xiao Pan was puzzled at his words and he became the centre of attention.

Standing besides Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and Mo Ao were staring viciously at him.

Xiang Shaolong respectfully got Xiao Pan to turn around and while he is turning around, he lightly poked the special needle at his neck. As Xiao Pan is exercising, his blood circulation is very strong and the needle was filled immediately.

Behind him, Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Lord Changping witnessed everything but the act was hidden from the eyes of everyone else.

Xiao Pan yelped: “Ai!” He went to touch his neck and purposely cried: “There is a mosquito!”

Xiang Shaolong stuffed the needle into Xu Xian’s hands and advised: “The Crown Prince must focus on the synergy between the eyes and the hands when shooting an arrow. However, it is easier to aim with the hand than the eyes. When the eye sees the target, it informs the heart and the heart will instruct the hand to shoot. This is quite cumbersome. If the hand is used

directly to aim at the target, you will not have this issue. Look!”

He simply drew out five flying needles and shot them towards the two hundred feet target board.

Nobody expected that he would be shooting flying needles instead of arrows and were stunned. The five flying needles hit the target board neatly in a straight row and the centre needle hit the centre of the bull’s eye. The distance between each needle is exactly one inch. It was a result that even Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate.

His flying needles may be famous but no one has actually seen it in action.

Witnessing his accuracy on a two hundred feet target board, everyone agrees that he has a frightening and special way of throwing the needles with such deafening results. Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and Mo Ao have a horrified expression on their faces.

Everyone present clapped and cheered loudly at his excellent display of talent.

Lu Buwei and Mo Ao exchanged a smile, thinking that Xiang Shaolong would be dead in a matter of days despite his godly ability.

Wang Ben ecstatically wanted to retrieve the flying needles and return them to Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan stopped him. He instructed: “Leave the needles on the target board. I want to keep this as a souvenir. Let the target board stay like that for the next three days.”

Xiao Pan was full of admiration: “I finally comprehend the essence of Grand Tutor’s terrifying flying needles. They were thrown with the hand rather than with the eyes.”

Xiang Shaolong may have been promoted to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander but he is still holding the post as a Grand Tutor so that he may still impart lessons to Xiao Pan the Crown Prince.

Xiang Shaolong secretly assessed Lu Buwei, Mo Ao and Lu Niang Rong’s expressions. He noticed that Lu Niang Rong has a lingering fear in her eyes which is probably caused by his excellent shot. Frankly speaking, he has no confidence of repeating this feat.

During his usual practise, he was using his eyes to aim at the target. Only today did he really use his hands to aim at the target board.

Lu Gong praised: “I am afraid no one can match Shaolong’s flying needles skill in the past, the present or in the future.”

Lu Buwei laughed: “Rong’er! Now, you have seen Official Xiang’s true abilities.”

Lu Niang Rong lowered her face to prevent others from detecting the dilemma expression on her face. Xiao Pan took this chance to invite: “Grand Tutor, please have a chat with me in my tent!”

With Li Si in tow, they walked towards the main royal tent.

Before Xiang Shaolong could take a step, Lu Gong whispered: “After you have seen the Crown Prince, come to my tent immediately.” He winked at him with a knowing expression.

Xiang Shaolong could not understand how he managed to draw Lu Buwei’s blood or that he has something else to discuss with him. With this concern, he proceeded to the main royal tent. Within the tent, Xiao Pan sighed: “Grand Tutor must teach me how to shoot the flying needles the way you did.”

Li Si praised: “No wonder Official Xiang has always been able to escape precarious situations and live another day to tell the tale. These flying needles are virtually undetectable when they are being shot and there is no way to parry them with a sword.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down on a thick carpet and bitterly smiled: “The Crown Prince and Official Li need not praise me to the skies. Last night, I made an about-turn at the gates of hell. That is what I call pure luck.”

Under Xiao Pan questioning, Xiang Shaolong revealed everything that has happened last night.

When Xiao Pan learned about Lord Gaoling’s rebellion and Lu Buwei’s scheming, he angrily swore: “These two men are atrocious! Do they still regard me as their King?”

Li Si hurriedly assured: “Please do not be angry. Official Xiang has plans to counter them.”

Xiao Pan looked over to Xiang Shaolong and Xiang Shaolong nodded: “When we know the time that Lord Gaoling is attacking the camp, we can use our army to wipe him out. Here, I wished that Crown Prince will lead the army personally. First, we can destroy Lord Gaoling’s forces and secondly, we can counter Lu Buwei’s schemes. In the future, no one will dare to challenge your authority.”

These words are what Xiao Pan wanted to hear. This future Qin Shi Huang loved to affirm his authority and he nodded: “Since Official Xiang is so confident, we shall act according to your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “This matter will require precise intelligence and acting according to circumstances. I will keep in contact with Official Li. When I have gathered the appropriate information, I will report to Crown Prince.” He secretly winked at Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan understood his meaning. Xiang Shaolong will prepare the army orders while he himself will execute them accordingly. Elated, his face became reddish and he nodded: “We will follow your advice!”

He continued: “Today, Empress told me that Lu Buwei wanted to marry his beloved third daughter to you. I thought Lu Buwei has a change of heart but it is all part of a trick. Ha! Mo Ao will die an unexplainable death. I am so happy.”

Li Si and Xiang Shaolong heard his words and knew that he is in great spirits. They did not hold back and joined him in laughter.

An attendant came to report that Lao Ai is here to report something. The three men immediately stopped laughing. Lao Ai came in and kneeled down, requesting: “The Empress wishes to see Crown Prince.”

With a scornful look, Xiao Pan replied: “I got it! Please return first. I will join you shortly.”

When Lao Ai has left the tent, Xiao Pan lowered his voice and asked: “Is Official Xiang ready to marry Lu Buwei’s precious daughter?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly smiled: “When Lu Buwei saw me still well and alive, he will try to annul the marriage. But that is his problem!”

Xiao Pan understood his meaning and nodded: “I know what to do!” And stood up.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si hurriedly kneeled down in respect.

Xiao Pan went forward and helped Xiang Shaolong up, whispering into his ear: “Master, please be careful. If anything happens to you, the world will be meaningless.”

He turned around and left.

Chapter 5

A Heartless Man Indeed

A drop of Xiao Pan's blood trickled out of the special needle and dripped into the bowl of special chemical.

Xu Xian retrieved another special needle filled with Lu Buwei's blood and brought it to the edge of the bowl but did not release the blood immediately.

Everyone was staring at Xiao Pan's drop of blood with excitement.

Inside Lu Gong's tent, there are ten over military leaders which are all important position holders. Except for Lu Gong and Xu Xian, there is Wang He, Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao and Lord Yiqu Ying Lou. It appears that Xiao Pan's relationship with Lu Buwei is of utmost importance to them.

Xiang Shaolong was squeezed in the middle of all these generals and he inquired: "How did you manage to get Lu Buwei's blood?"

Lord Yunyang Ying Ao replied: "I dragged him out for archery while Lu Gong and Wang He were jostling with him. Thus, we took his blood without his knowledge."

Lu Gong is not interested in their casual talk and called: "Xu Xian!" Xu Xian hardened his resolve and poured the second drop of blood into the bowl of chemical.

The crowd became as silent as a dormouse and everyone has a choked feeling. For an instant, everyone held their breaths.

The drop of blood entered the chemical and swirled to for a while before it came into contact with Xiao Pan's drop of blood.

Amazingly, the two drops of blood separated immediately like the two different magnet poles repelling each other.

The tent was filled with mad cheering.

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief.

Knowing the future can be a burden. Even though he is certain that Xiao Pan will pass the blood test, he cannot help but be worried like everyone else.

Back in his own tent, Ji Yanran and the other girls are carefully cleaning Xiang Shaolong's wound and applying fresh medicine. Teng Yi came back from his duties and sat down, reporting: "We have located Lord Gaoling's men!"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Where are they?"

Teng Yi is in a great mood and retrieved a map from his bosom, smiling: "The Qin hunting fair is child's play in front a seasoned hunter like me. If I hunt personally, all the tigers and wolves would be frightened off."

Xiang Shaolong assisted him in spreading the map and laughed: "Second Brother should have told me earlier. Then, I would prepare a large quantity

of tiger ears for sale at ten times the original price. I guarantee that the amateur hunters will not go back empty handed and I can even make a ton of money.”

Ji Yanran and the girls instantly broke out in laughter and giggles.

Teng Yi laughed: “Amateur hunters! That is a unique description.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “Where is the cave that Lord Gaoling’s men are hiding in?”

Teng Yi was stunned: “How did you know that?” Pointing to a group of mountains fifty miles from the campsite, he detailed: “This area has dense forests and is located at the upstream of River Jing. There are seven caves situated there which the locals have named the ‘Seven Connected Caves’. Lord Gaoling has planned their hiding spot well. Although we know that they are hiding there, it is impossible to locate their exact location. There is no way we can determine the size of their forces.”

Wu Tingfang innocently suggested: “Second Brother is exaggerating. Why don’t you surround the forest and set it on fire? I am sure they will be forced out by the burning.”

Xiang Shaolong loved her innocent and silly demeanour and smiled: “The forest is wet with the Spring dew. It is impossible to burn a forest. Ao!”

He caught hold of Wu Tingfang’s incoming fist but did not relent: “Unless we use the super fire that comes from the mouth of Wu’s First Mistress.”

Ji Yanran mocked: "Since our hubby came back from the jaws of death, he has become cheekier."

Zhao Zhi clamoured over to help Wu Tingfang withdraw her fist from Xiang Shaolong's grasp.

As Teng Yi took a closer look at Xiang Shaolong's injury, he added: "But the moment they left the seven caves, they will not escape the detection of our Jing Village hunters. Hei! I think we should use our own men and allow them to gain more battle experience."

Xiang Shaolong clapped Teng Yi's shoulder and agreed: "We shall do as Second Brother advised. Fortunately, Du Bi is not in Xianyang City or things could be more complicated. Hee! In Lu Buwei's eyes, I am someone due to die in two days. No matter what I do in these two days, he will just bear with me and even pretend to support me so as to allay the suspicions of others. Most crucially, he must put on a fine act in front of Zhu Ji. Thus, I must find some things to do so as to give justice to Mo Ao's brilliant scheming."

Zhao Zhi is bandaging his wound with Ji Yanran. When she heard this, she whined: "Before your leg has recovered, we will not allow you to participate in any fighting."

Xiang Shaolong feigned surprise: "Who said that I am going to fight with someone?"

Ji Yanran smiled: "Sister Zhi, he is teasing you! Attack him now and see if he will retaliate or not."

In the midst of their fun, the tent attendant reported: “Grand Tutor Qin is here!”

As the image of Qin Qing surfaced in his memory, he came to realise that everyone is so happy today because they have finally succeeded in countering Mo Ao. The presence of this man is a threat to their well-being.

Ever since he delivered the poison pill back to his throat, they have become more relaxed and even the usually serious Teng Yi is more jovial now.

But they must still keep their guard up. As long as Mo Ao is still alive, they must be careful and not allow the enemy to see through them.

The Tian sisters have just finished tidying up Xiang Shaolong’s clothes when Qin Qing entered the tent with a heavy expression on her face.

After all his encounters with her, this is the first time she came to Xiang Shaolong’s ‘territory’. He had a strange feeling inside him. But eyeing her serious expression, he felt that something is amiss.

Wu Tingfang welcomed: “Sister Qin should have come earlier. We were having a big showdown!”

Ji Yanran noticed her expression too and frowned: “What is bothering Sister Qin?” Teng Yi greeted Qin Qing and took the chance to take his leave.

Qin Qing sat down opposite Ji Yanran and gently replied: “I need to speak to your husband privately.”

The girls were slightly startled but Yanran firmly stood up and state: “We have to cross the river soon. We will be waiting for both of you outside.”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at Qin Qing with astonishment and asked: “Why is Grand Tutor Qin so upset?”

Qin Qing stared at him coldly and retorted: “I dare not be upset but have to congratulate Official Xiang instead for being able to marry the beautiful daughter of Lu Buwei!”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood her concern and smiled: “Grand Tutor Qin is mistaken. This is a complicated affair. In reality, Lu Buwei does not want to marry her daughter to me and neither do I want to marry her.”

Qin Qing was shocked: “Then why did Empress tell me that Lu Buwei has asked her to arrange the marriage and that you have agreed to the wedding?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled at her and softly pleaded: “Will Grand Tutor Qin please trust me this once? After the hunting fair, you can find out the truth from sister Yanran.”

Qin Qing’s face tightened and she shot with displeasure: “Why is Official Xiang always so secretive and says things halfway? Are you treating me like an outsider?”

Xiang Shaolong did not mean to hide things from her but looking at her enthusiasm, he was tempted and asked: “Do you think I treat you like an

outsider?”

Both Qin Qing’s cheeks turned red and she wailed: “Official Xiang is going to be rude to me again?”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that day when he hugged her slender waist. He coughed: “I dare not.”

Qin Qing noticed his eyes focusing on her own waist and was infuriated. Lowering her head, she bit her lips and demanded: “Are you saying or not?”

Xiang Shaolong saw her pouting like his lover and was aroused. Leaning forward towards her body, he moved his lips to her jade ears and enjoyed her nice fragrance. He whispered: “This is a big secret which cannot be known to a third person. Please forgive me for speaking to you in this manner.”

Qin Qing trembled slightly and her ears were red already. Feeling itchy at the ears, she wailed: “Does Official Xiang know what he is doing?”

Since Qin Qing did not shy away, Xiang Shaolong is even more excited at approaching this untouchable woman. He teased: “Shall I go ahead and tell you the secret then?” Qin Qing dared not look at him and nodded slightly.

Xiang Shaolong held back the urge to kiss her earlobe but cannot resist staring at her fast heaving chest. He gently divulged: “Lu Buwei has sent someone to poison me and estimate that I will not survive these two days. Therefore, he decided to marry his daughter to me and even proclaim it to

the whole world so that when I am killed, no one will suspect him and he can even deceive Empress.”

Qin Qing shook strongly and her face became as white as a sheet. She turned to face him and their lips nearly met.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and retreated half a feet. Feeling regretful, he apologised: “I am sorry for alarming Grand Tutor Qin. Luckily, I have the poison removed from my body and Lu Buwei still has no idea. He will try his best to annul the marriage later and the Empress will know that he is trying to deceive her. That is the reason why I accept the marriage proposal.”

Qin Qing sighed with relief and put her hands on her heart, scolding: “You gave me such a fright.” Her face began to regain some colour and it was a captivating sight.

Xiang Shaolong was appreciative: “Thanks for Grand Tutor Qin’s concern.”

Her face may still be slightly red but she has recomposed herself. Smiling lightly, she gently state: “I have mistaken you! And I forgive you for being rude to me but you must not do it again in the future. Oh! My ear is so itchy.”

Xiang Shaolong is fully intoxicated and nodded with a smile: “Let me consider about whether I will be rude to you in the future and tell you my decision later. This is a big secret which you must keep it to yourself.”

Qin Qing giggled and shot him a lovely look. She gingerly stood up and sighed: “You! You are incorrigible.”

Xiang Shaolong stood up with her and shrugged his shoulders: "I will be thanking the heavens as long as Grand Tutor Qin is not always angry at me."

Qin Qing slowly sighed: "You are the reason for my anger! You are always so secretive and I always have to force you to tell me the truth. Right! When you shot the five flying needles earlier, it has caused such a commotion that now the whole camp knows about it. When I came out of the Empress's tent, I saw Guan Zhongxie and Ying Ying analyzing the needles on the target board."

She lowered her head and softly pleaded: "Can Official Xiang give me one of your flying needles as a gift?"

Without hesitation, Xiang Shaolong drew out a flying needle from his waist belt and smoothly grabbed her hand and pressed the needle in the centre of her palm. He coaxed: "Please forgive me for being rude to you again." In normal circumstances, no man is allowed to touch her hand.

Qin Qing was taken by surprise at his molest and quickly withdrew her hand, wailing: "You..."

Xiang Shaolong put a finger to his lips and signalled her to keep quiet. He pointed outside the tent to indicate that he is afraid that others will hear her wailing. He then smiled: "This is the price to pay for being my confidante. In the future, I will look for you and will be polite and rude as I please."

Qin Qing's expression became annoyed and walked towards the tent exit. At the exit, she stopped and coldly state: "You have arms and legs and you can visit me if you like and not visit me if you don't like. Who cares!" She left in a

huff.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head with a bitter smile. He and Qin Qing are losing more and more of their self-control. One fine day, they will land up in bed and the consequences will be disastrous.

But if he can conduct an illicit affair with her, it will be tremendously thrilling!

The hunting parties crossed the river in different batches.

Under Xu Xian's instructions, another two more bridges were built so there is now a total of four bridges.

The plains were filled with sounds of hunting dogs barking. Those with hunting eagles sent the eagles up in the air to showcase their grandeur and might.

Xiang Shaolong thought about Zhou Liang's Warrior Eagles and was very interested in them. In the future, he will have his own eagles to help his fight and they will be remarkable toys too.

Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and the girls joined Empress Ji's hunting party while he himself left to join Xiao Pan's party.

It is better for him to avoid Zhu Ji so as to prevent any awkwardness and it will also prevent Lao Ai from being jealous of him.

When he came to the river bank, Xiao Pan has begun crossing the River Jing

under the protection of the palace guards. Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians rushed to the back of the queue and ran into Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I thought Official Guan has joined the Female Warriors!"

Guan Zhongxie knew that he is teasing him for spending all his time with Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. He plainly state: "Work is more important. If I do not chase them off, Official Xiang will blame me for neglecting my work."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. Since they are killing Lu Gong, Lu Dan'er will no longer be of any use to them. That is why Guan Zhongxie is disregarding Lu Dan'er now.

Ying Ying is Guan Zhongxie's way to spy on the Lord Changping brothers. But since Xiang Shaolong, Lu Gong, etc will be killed during Lord Gaoling's ambush, the Changping brothers will be blamed for their incompetence and Lu Buwei will force Empress Zhu Ji to execute them. Lu Buwei will then be able to fill up the posts of the leader of the palace guards with his own subordinates.

After all, the Imperial Infantry army is behind protecting Xianyang City and will not be involved with Lord Gaoling's ambush. Thus, Guan Zhongxie will be not implicated.

As a result, this heartless man Guan Zhongxie cannot be bothered with Ying Ying anymore.

Mo Ao's devious scheme is truly formidable. Originally, Xiang Shaolong and the rest would have suffered a huge defeat. It is due to pure luck that they now have the upper hand!

Guan Zhongxie saw that Xiang Shaolong is silent and thought that he is angry. He frantically flattered: "Official Xiang's wondrous flying needles skill is unparalleled. I submit to your superior talents."

Xiang Shaolong dished: "It is nothing great!"

As both men rode across the wooden bridge, heavy sounds of hoof beats can be heard as the horses are now stepping on wood.

A strong wind blew towards them and Xiang Shaolong is in a great mood. The sun is slowly setting in the west horizon and its last rays shone across the flatlands like a sheet of gold.

Guan Zhongxie reminded: "I nearly forgot. Premier Lu is looking for Official Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong grunted a reply and rode back to shore towards the main tents.

Chapter 06

Campfire Banquet

The east shore of River Jing is an unending wilderness for hundreds of miles. With occasional hills, thick forests and small streams, it is a hunter's dream come true.

Even with ten thousand hunters threading on the plains, they looked like small animals from the bird's eye view. In an instant, everyone was split apart as they began hunting for animals.

Xiao Pan's hunting party is the largest as it includes Zhu Ji's party as well as other members of the royal family. They did not participate in the hunt directly but were leisurely standing near the river bank and admiring the activities.

Lu Buwei led Xiang Shaolong up a small hill and they looked down at the hunting dogs chasing and barking at a prey while Xiao Pan, Wang Ben, the Changping Brothers and a group of palace guards chasing behind them. He joyfully remarked: "I have spoken to Empress. During the campfire banquet later, she will personally announce the marriage of you and Niang Rong."

Xiang Shaolong is full of admiration at his convincing acting skills.

Lu Buwei asked: "You should be agreeable, right?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "I am only concerned that I am not good enough for her."

Lu Buwei chortled: "I have always been appreciative of your humbleness. When I move into the new Premier Residence, I will see to the marriage immediately and fulfil one of my greatest wishes."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sniggered that he will instead have a big headache when that really happens. Visioning their future troubles, he was jumping for joy inside.

Lu Buwei asked again: "Has there been any news about Lord Gaoling?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be worried: "I have sent someone to spy on him but we have yet to detect any ambushing army. We may have been overly suspicious."

Lu Buwei agreed: "Well, it is better to be safe than sorry. I shall put you fully in charge of this."

He then softly sighed: "Shaolong! Are you still suspicious of my sincerity?"

Xiang Shaolong was caught unaware and he was speechless for a while. He stuttered: "Why does Premier Lu say so?"

Lu Buwei bitterly smiled: "Shaolong need not deceive me. When Zhongxie invited you for drinks at Drunken Wind Brothel last night, he saw you discarding the wine Dan Meimei poured for you. Ai! Do you think the wine is

poisonous?”

Xiang Shaolong took his hat off him. He knew he must give a reply and smiled bitterly in return: “As what Premier Lu says, it is better to be safe than sorry.”

They exchanged a glance and burst out laughing at the same time.

Lu Buwei clapped Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and mentioned between his laughs: “When Niang Rong marries you, you will be my son-in-law. By then, you can drink all the wine you want with peace of mind.”

Xiang Shaolong has to acknowledge his prowess. Lu Buwei’s words is trying to convince him that he has been overly suspicious with Dan Meimei and gain his loyalty even at the last moment before his death. This brainwave must have come from Mo Ao to prevent Xiang Shaolong from working with Xu Xian to attack them before the third hunting day.

Thinking about this, he laughed happily.

Under the shimmering stars and the bright moon, the camp is in a celebratory mood.

The animals that were hunted were being promptly roasted over fire spits. Different campfires scattered around the campsite has made the entire camping ground glowing with a beautiful red.

The ten best hunters have been invited to the royal tent to be rewarded by Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan and will join their table at the Campfire Banquet.

Wu Tingfang is the best hunter among the girls and is busying cleaning her catch with Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters. Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are seated on one side and are in deep conversation.

Xiang Shaolong and the Lord Changping brothers have just come back from their patrol. They reminded the soldiers not to neglect their duties despite the festive mood and keep their guard up at all times. Teng Yi and Jing Jun came back shortly after them.

Both men had just led the Wu Family Elite Army into battle positions and they are now spying on Lord Gaoling's men. Xiang Shaolong can finally relieve this burden of ambush from his mind. After some discussion with them, he left to find Xu Xian. Just as he crossed the defending gates, he was detained by Ying Ying.

This lass has an unfriendly expression on her face and she coldly state: "Xiang Shaolong! Come with me!"

Puzzled, he followed her down the slope and they advanced deeply into a group of tents. Compared to the lights and sounds of the assembly grounds, they are now in a place where it is much more quiet, dark and serene.

Ying Ying leaned against a tent and stared at him viciously.

Her long hair was let down and it is still wet in some areas. She carries a fragrance that is associated with a woman's scent after a shower. Needless to say, she must have had a nice shower in the nearby river.

Out of a sudden, his mind is filled with various questions.

Since he got to know Ying Ying, he has been troubled with her and it is hard to establish their relationship properly. Moreover, he was busy with work and countering Lu Buwei. Thus, he did not spend much time to think about her.

Now that Mo Ao is going to die, he has some room to think about the future.

Since he is opposing Lu Buwei, he should ruthlessly snatch her from the hands of Guan Zhongxie. Additionally, it is common for men in this era to have multiple wives. After all, she is a rare beauty too. When they are married, he will share a closer relationship with the Lord Changping brothers. The Qin military and the royal family will see him as their own family. At the same time, it will deal a blow to Guan Zhongxie.

If Lu Gong is not going to die, the Lord Changping brothers will keep their jobs. Guan Zhongxie will then try to woo Ying Ying to secure his position in Xianyang City.

For Lu Dan'er, Lu Gong has opposed their relationship and Guan Zhongxie cannot disregard this powerful general. Even if Zhu Ji interferes, Lu Gong will not budge. Ying Ying, on the other hand, does not have this issue.

Whoever marries Ying Ying will only stand to benefit. Thinking about this, he cannot help but smile bitterly. There is a price to pay for marrying this stubborn girl. He wonders if he should harden his heart.

If he wants to woo Ying Ying, the hunting fair would be his best opportunity as Guan Zhongxie will be disregarding her. After the hunting fair, he will have to contend with Guan Zhongxie for her attention. Frankly speaking, he could not be bothered about Guan Zhongxie's antics.

As these thoughts ran through his mind like a shooting meteor, Ying Ying hatefully exclaimed: "Xiang Shaolong! Do you hate me a lot? Whenever I look for you, you are always so apprehensive and even use your leg injury as an excuse. Now, you can even perform your flying needles stunt in front of the Crown Prince. Now, the whole camp thinks that you are out to annoy me. How are we going to settle this debt?"

Xiang Shaolong realised that she had seen his exceptional flying needles and is now full of admiration for him.

She may be putting on an aggressive front but is actually trying to mend fences with him. Thus, she came to find him alone without the rest of the female warriors.

Xiang Shaolong took two steps forward and reached an intimate distance with her. They are now so close he can hear her breathing. He smiled: "Fine! It is my fault. But my leg is really injured! If you don't believe me, I can take off my pants and show you!"

Ying Ying's face reddened immediately and she stomped her feet: "Who wants to see you without your pants? I want you to throw the flying needles again."

Xiang Shaolong was agonized and knew that he cannot match up to his earlier performance. He bitterly smiled: "When I threw the flying needles earlier, my wound reopened. Can we find some other things to do instead?"

Ying Ying's attitude to him has indeed improved. She innocently asked: "What shall we do?"

Xiang Shaolong was inspired as he recalled her brother saying that the people of Qin are uncivilised barbarians who are more open minded. His eyes cannot help but strayed to her full bosom. He asked: "Where is your tent?"

Ying Ying's face is burning red and she wailed: "What are you looking at?" She retreated half a step and her back is fully up against the tent.

Xiang Shaolong mocked: "Every man loves to look at the figure of a beautiful woman and Miss Ying need not over react! At dawn, I am going to your tent to seek your forgiveness and this should give you enough face already."

Ying Ying was delighted and stretched out her pinkie, smiling: "You promise?"

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his own pinkie and hook onto hers. Admiring her large and attractive eyes, he cautioned: "You must not ambush me in your tent. Hng!"

Ying Ying knows that this man is eyeing her chest and yet she props her chest up even more and hissed: "Who wants to ambush you? Remember! If you do not show up, I will hate you for the rest of my life."

Using his pinkie, Xiang Shaolong pulled Ying Ying towards him. Ying Ying let out a shrill cry and fell on him and her pert breasts pressed against his muscular chest without any reservations. She was shocked and moved away hastily out of his bosom but did not appear to be annoyed. She shot him a look and described: "My tent is to the west of the Royal Tent with a purple flag. There is a purple flower sewn on the door of the tent door. Do not forget." Smiling sweetly, she skipped away like a child.

Xiang Shaolong did not anticipate that their grievances can be so easily settled and was pleased. He guessed that the people of Qin love hunting fairs because it is also a good time to date as well.

The main assembly ground is used for the campfire banquet. It is an outdoor dining concept with tents, defending gates and defending walls surrounding it.

Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji were the hosts of the banquet and took the northern seats. In front of them are three rows of sixty odd tables and each table can seat four to six men. Torches were placed between each table which adds to the atmosphere of the banquet.

Wine was free flowing and food is naturally their hunting prey. There are all kinds of barbequed and fragrant fowl meat and animal meat.

Except for Lord Gaoling and Tian Dan who excused themselves, everyone from the royal family is present. Besides some special guests like Lu Dan'er, Ying Ying, Ji Yanran, etc, the remaining participants are the ten best hunters. Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and Qin Qing are sharing one table which

caused Lu Gong to stare at their table occasionally. The younger men with less willpower are almost staring at them non-stop. Heading one of the rows is Prince Dan and Xu Yi Ze, who chatted with Zhu Ji once in a while.

Ji Yanran and the ladies are adopting a carefree attitude and disregarded the fact that they are the centre of attraction.

This is the first time Xiao Pan is hosting such a grand and unique banquet. He was fidgeting in his seat and his expression looked unnatural.

But the most nervous man is Lao Ai who is seated behind Zhu Ji. Zhu Ji had informed him that the Crown Prince will personally announce his promotion later.

The most unfortunate man is Xiang Shaolong. He was allocated to Lu Buwei's table and was squeezed between Lu Buwei and the heartless Lu Niang Rong cum Guan Zhongxie. Mo Ao is not invited as his status is not high enough and it also suits his low profile.

Everyone toasted Xiao Pan first before Lu Buwei gave a welcome speech. Following that, Xiao Pan took the stand and announced the start of the banquet.

Lu Buwei toasted Xu Xian and Lu Gong first before he sat down and commented to Xiao Pan: "I heard Crown Prince shot a condor earlier. This is a good omen. We shall enjoy a year of bountiful harvest and peace within the nation."

Xiao Pan joyfully raised his cup: “Right Premier, let me toast you.”

Lu Buwei quickly drank up.

Besides them, Xiang Shaolong was cheering in his heart. Lu Buwei’s acting could have won him a Lifetime Achievement Award while Xiao Pan could have won the Best Male Actor Award. After all, he will be the main leader during this era.

Guan Zhongxie spoke out: “Will Official Xiang perform his flying needles stunt again to honour the banquet hosted by the Crown Prince?”

Xiang Shaolong cursed secretly and turned his head around. He could sense intense awkwardness from Lu Niang Rong and he weakly smiled at her before telling Guan Zhongxie: “Mine is a lousy skill not worth mentioning. I have yet to see Official Guan with his iron bow. Will Official Guan fulfil my wish?” He laughed to himself. He is sure Guan Zhongxie will somehow display his talent and impress the people of Qin just like what he did with the flying needles.

Guan Zhongxie laughed loudly: “As long as it is an order from Official Xiang, I will not dare to disobey. If not for Official Xiang’s injury, I would love to spar with you and learn from an expert like yourself.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong is certain that he will show off his skill at the assembly ground after the dinner.

Behind him, Lu Buwei leaned over and instructed Lu Niang Rong: “Niang Rong, you must serve Official Xiang well.”

Lu Niang Rong batted an eye at Xiang Shaolong and replied: "But Official Xiang has not spoken to me yet!"

Lu Buwei patted Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and exclaimed; "Shaolong! Make her happy."

Xiang Shaolong can sense Zhu Ji, Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and everyone else looking at them. Totally uncomfortable, he bitterly smiled: "I got it."

Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie began to chat among themselves and provided an opportunity for them to interact.

Xiang Shaolong looked at Lu Niang Rong and she happened to look back. Xiang Shaolong forcefully smiled: "What did Third Mistress catch today?"

Initially, Lu Niang Rong managed to force out a smile but her face darkened when she faced his penetrating eyes. She lowered her head and shook it, replying: "I am not in the mood to hunt today."

Xiang Shaolong thought that she is not so bad after all as she is suffering from a guilty conscience. He wondered aloud: "Am I the one behind your bad mood?"

Lu Niang Rong trembled slightly and raised her face, assessing him with a look of dilemma on her face.

Under the illumination of the torch, Lu Niang Rong looks youthful and charming. Her beauty can be compared to Ying Ying's but her figure is not as

good as hers.

He sensed that something is amiss. Apparently, Lu Niang Rong's eyes have turned red and she is crying.

Even Lu Buwei saw her crying and frantically exclaimed: "Niang Rong! Do you want to go back to your tent and rest?"

As Lu Niang Rong unsteadily stood up, she attracted the attention of Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Lu Gong and Xu Xian. As the tears begin to fall from her face onto her clothes, she wailed: "I am not marrying him!" Despite Lu Buwei's coaxing, she ran off into the tents in the background after finishing her words. As the majority of the crowd is busy engaging in wine and revelry, not many people are aware of her outburst. The lively mood of the banquet is not affected by her disturbance.

Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie watched helplessly as she ran off into the darkness.

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to have a better opinion of her. She is not totally like her father who can lie with his eyes wide open. At the same time, he concluded that she has some feelings for him.

Lao Ai came over to invite Lu Buwei on Zhu Ji's instructions. Lu Buwei winked at Guan Zhongxie before he left.

Guan Zhongxie is about to chase after Lu Niang Rong when Xiang Shaolong grabbed him and reasoned: "Let her go! Love cannot be forced."

Guan Zhongxie was taken aback and returned to his seat, smiling bitterly: "Official Xiang is right!"

Lu Buwei came back to their table and sighed in a deep voice: "We will postpone the wedding until further notice! Ai! Shaolong! I do not know what to say."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly delighted but feigned sadness: "Premier Lu need not fret. Hei! I wish..." He wanted to find a reason to slip away from Lao Ai approached their table again but it was Xiang Shaolong he invited this time round.

Xiang Shaolong feared Zhu Ji the most and forced himself to go to her table. When he came to her, Zhu Ji plainly stated: "Shaolong need not pay his respects. Have a seat!"

Xiang Shaolong sat down adjoining her and whispered: "What instructions does Empress have?" he noticed Lao Ai seated five feet behind Zhu Ji trying to listen to their conversation. The environment is quite noisy and he is sure Lao Ai cannot eavesdrop very well.

Under Lao Ai's nourishment, Zhu Ji is like a brand new person and is even more enchanting than before. She slowly assessed him and sighed: "Shaolong! Both you and Zheng'er have changed."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to say these words. Shocked, he exclaimed: "Empress!"

An irritated Zhu Ji scolded: “I do not want to hear any hypocritical words from you. Ai! Are both of you blaming me?” At the last sentence, she softened her tone and her words carried some tinge of helplessness.

Xiang Shaolong is filled with emotions. He knew that he can prevent her from being seduced by Lao Ai but he cannot go against fate and allow himself to replace Lao Ai. That is why he did not succumb to her and allowed her to sink deeper into Lao Ai’s love trap. Guilt-ridden, he was dumbfounded.

Zhu Ji leaned closer and whispered: “Every time we did it, I imagined that I am doing it with you, understand?”

Xiang Shaolong shook uncontrollably and cannot help but look up to her pretty face.

Zhu Ji’s eyes turned slightly red and she avoided his gaze. Recomposing herself, she calmly ordered: “Commander Xiang, you are dismissed!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a moment before he returned to Lu Buwei’s table.

Before he can say a word to the two men, Lu Dan’er and Ying Ying were holding each other’s hands and skipped up to them. They insist on bringing Guan Zhongxie to their table to compete on wine-drinking but their eyes were mainly fixated on Xiang Shaolong.

Guan Zhongxie is not in the mood and evaded: “I am been ordered by Official Xiang to perform later.” He faced Xiang Shaolong and continued: “If Official

Xiang does not want to see me screw up, he will have to substitute me in accepting the challenge of these two ladies.”

Xiang Shaolong is afraid that Lu Buwei will interrogate him on what Zhu Ji has said to him and laughed out loud: “Official Guan is so eloquent!” He turned around and left with the girls.

Lu Dan’er is pleasantly surprised and happily pinched him, cooing: “Looks like you are a clever man. Shall we bury the hatchet?”

Xiang Shaolong was amused that Ying Ying did not tell Lu Dan’er what had happened between them earlier. He winked at Ying Ying and is about to reply her when two men appeared and blocked their path. It was Lord Changwen and Jing Jun. Jing Jun smiled: “Are the two Mistresses trying to make my Third Brother drunk? You have to challenge me first.”

The two ladies saw him with a wine flask in his left hand and a wine cup in his right hand. Stopping, they accepted: “Do you think we are afraid of you?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Jing Jun to be so familiar with them and guessed that they have crossed paths before.

Lord Changwen faced Xiang Shaolong and smiled: “Has Official Xiang received the red flower from Sister and Dan’er?”

The face of both girls immediately became red and they stared ferociously at Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Dan'er put her hands on her waist and wailed: "What is the use of giving it to him? He is a useless cripple."

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong questioned: "What is the red flower?"

Jing Jun joked: "You can give him the flower but I will represent him in doing the deed."

Both girls started to laugh and protest. Their faces are thoroughly red and they looked even more enchanting under the illumination of the torches.

Lord Changwen stepped forward and explained to Xiang Shaolong: "It is our Qin custom. During the hunting fair, an unmarried girl can present an embroidered red flower to a man she likes. The man can then visit her in her tent to spend the night. Hei! Now you understand!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect the Qin ladies to be so open minded and was flabbergasted. He unconsciously shifted his gaze to the two ladies. Ying Ying stomped her foot and yelled: "Second Brother, you are spouting nonsense."

Lu Dan'er charmingly smiled: "I have not decided who to give my flower to. Let's see what happens later."

Xiang Shaolong was visibly excited. The open-minded Qin girl is something the other six states can never offer. He smiled at Jing Jun: "Little Jun! Miss Dan'er is dropping you a big hint."

Lord Changwen joked: "So if your Fifth Brother gets the flower, are you

performing the deed for him?”

Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er may be the butt of their jokes but did not mind them at all. They only coquettishly protest which makes them even more interesting.

Jing Jun loves to flirt with women and smiled: “If I managed to get both red flowers from both ladies, I will leave Miss Ying to my Third Brother and keep Miss Dan’er for myself. Ao!”

Lu Dan’er sent him a kick. Jing Jun sprang up and flipped to the side. His two hands were still holding the wine flask and wine cup but not a single drop of wine has spilled. The other four persons were amazed at his agility.

The banquet is still in progress and the two hundred odd guests are still having a good time. Here, they are also having their own fun.

This is the first time Lord Changwen had seen Jing Jun’s skills and he breathes in heavily: “Based on this skill, Dan’er should give you her red flower.”

Lu Dan’er enthusiastically stared at Jing Jun: “You monkey! Flip one more time for me.”

With a lazy and annoying look on his face, Jing Jun cheekily glanced at Lu Dan’er and joked: “If you become a female monkey, I will become a male monkey and bring you to the trees and somersault non-stop.”

Lu Dan’er let out a war cry and rushed forward with two clenched fists. Jing

Jun actually managed to drink his wine and avoided her blows at the same time. With Lu Dan'er hot at his heels, they soon disappeared among the tents.

Xiang Shaolong was moved. Jing Jun may not be a Qin native but he is a sworn brother of him and Wang Jian. Moreover, he holds a military post. Lu Gong may agree to let him date Lu Dan'er.

Lu Dan'er is a teenage girl and it is a stage where she is very indecisive. She is interested in Guan Zhongxie because of his heroic air. If Jing Jun can humour her and with Lu Gong's support, coupled with their compatible age and their similar love for fun, they may eventually fall in love. This will prevent Guan Zhongxie from using Lu Dan'er to penetrate the influential circles of the Qin military.

A bell was struck and everyone quietened down.

The three persons stood still and listened to Xiao Pan's speech.

Xiao Pan stood up and greeted the Empress. He then proclaimed the ten best hunters to be promoted to the rank of Captain with immediate effect.

The ten young men were overjoyed and hurriedly knelt down, giving thanks to Xiao Pan and swearing their loyalty to him.

Xiao Pan continued to announce a slew of promotions, including promoting Teng Sheng as the new Outer Custodian and Lao Ai as the Inner Custodian.

Some officials felt that Lao Ai's promotion is undeserved. But looking at Empress Zhu Ji fawning over him and the lack of objections from Xu Xian and Lu Gong, they accepted the changes reluctantly.

It was followed by 'ShowTime'. First, Xiao Pan listed Lu Buwei's achievements in conquering the three provinces and promoted him to become the new Premier Mentor. It is just a post without any authority. Needless to say, it was Li Si who prepared this speech for him.

Although Lu Buwei wields plenty of power in the Qin Court, as long as the two influential men Xu Xian and Lu Gong do not object, this promotion will be official.

Finally, everyone toasted one another and the banquet came to a conclusion.

Lord Changwen frantically excused him and rushed forward to escort Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji.

Slightly fearful, Ying Ying retreated two steps and whined: "Remember what you promised."

Xiang Shaolong objected: "I take my word back. We have decided to reconcile but you flirted with another man in front of me. Now that he is gone, you are using me as a substitute."

Ying Ying stomped her feet: "It is not what you see. I actually wanted to... Ah! Who do you think you are? Why must I explain things to you?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was infuriated and she is beginning to cry. Beside them, everyone is leaving the banquet area. He softened and smiled: "All right! I surrender. I am fine with being a substitute."

Ying Ying is so incensed she nearly wanted to draw her sword. She roared: "I said that you are not a substitute. I have always... Forget it! You try skipping our appointment!" She turned around and stomped away.

Xiang Shaolong shouted: "What about the red flower?"

Ying Ying increased her pace away from him.

Xiang Shaolong turned around and came face to face with Ji Yanran. The beauty batted an eye at him and sighed: "Hubby has regained his flirty ways."

Xiang Shaolong sighed and pulled her to one side, explaining the real reason behind Ying Ying's seduction.

Ji Yanran sighed: "Hubby must be careful. Earlier, Guan Zhongxie has been paying close attention to all of you. He may try to sow discord between the two of you. After all, Ying Ying belongs to the royal family and Guan Zhongxie will only stand to benefit if he marries her."

Xiang Shaolong assured: "Since the demise of Princess Qian and the maids, I have lost my interests in girls and only hope to spend the rest of my life in peace with all of you. If Ying Ying chooses to marry Guan Zhongxie, so be it."

Ji Yanran dragged him aside to avoid the men riding horses in their direction.

She whispered: "Do you swear that you have no feelings for Sister Qin?"

Xiang Shaolong's face reddened: "Why did you bring her up?"

Ji Yanran questioned: "Why did the two of you say in the tent? When she left, her face is thoroughly red and full of joy."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I speak normally! It is her skin which is too thin."

Ji Yanran slightly whined: "Sister Qin is someone with lots of self-control. She is in love with you and that is why her skin has become thin."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "It is my fault! Ai! Why do I always get into this kind of trouble?"

Ji Yanran smiled: "You are good looking, kind hearted and eloquent. Otherwise, I will not have been won over by your antics and become your wife."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "How dare you say I use antics to seduce you? I am not going to let you off!"

Ji Yanran charmingly giggled: "Who needs you to let me off?"

Xiang Shaolong was aroused and cheerful. Jing Jun happened to come back. He laughed: "The night performances are about to begin. Are Third Brother and Third Sister going to stay here and enjoy each other's company?"

In the midst of laughter and scolding, the three people walked towards the defending gates.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to ask him about Lu Dan'er.

Jing Jun happily recalled: "This lass is really b!tchy. Even after I molested her, she still came after me. Finally, I protected my head and allowed her to trash me. She may have a fearsome look on her face and her blows are definitely controlled to avoid hurting me. So exciting!"

As Xiang Shaolong waved to acknowledge everyone around them, he reminded: "To win her heart, you must take advantage of these two days. Do you understand?"

Jing Jun nodded his head vigorously and instantly disappeared into the crowd in an unknown direction. Behind him, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran could not help but break out into smiles.

Chapter 07

Exchanging Pointers on The Dueling Ground

Four young lads were riding handsome horses and entered the assembly ground from the east. When they arrived at the centre of the grounds, they picked up speed and strung an arrow to their bow at the same time. It was a neat formation and the crowd of ten thousand people is cheering for them. Just as everyone expected them to shoot their arrows at the target boards, the four men actually flipped upside down and fire their arrows while they were positioned under the horses' belly. Zng! All the four arrows managed to hit the centre ring of the target board while one arrow nearly hit the bull's eye. While the arrows are still quivering on the target board, the four men have flipped back onto their saddles and rode across the grandstand, saluting Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. The crowd burst out into loud cheering and applause.

Most of the crowd were seated on the slope between the assembly ground and the royal tents. As they are looking down from a higher place, they actually enjoy a better view compared to those at the stands.

After the four riders have left, everyone was still fascinated by their amazing performance. Since no one is confident of performing a better show, the stage was unoccupied for the time being.

Xiao Pan stood up from his grandstand and threw four arrows down to the four riders.

The four men are mad with glee. They leapt down the horse and picked up the arrows. They proceeded up the grandstand to receive their rewards from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong, his three wives, two maids, Teng Yi, Qin Qing and the Eighteen Guardians were seated on the slope and watching the activities from afar. They are finally beginning to understand the importance of this hunting fair to the people of Qin.

It is equivalent to the Olympic Games of the modern world.

Every ambitious man will use these three days to showcase his talent so as to win military promotions and gain the favour of the royal family as well as the various high ranking officials.

The really capable ones will even win the affection of girls from prestigious families like Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. They will stand to benefit in their love life and career paths.

The annual hunting fair is a highlight of Qin. But not everyone is eligible to participate. Except for the royal family and families of high ranking officials, other participants must go through a selection by their various departments before they can take part in the hunting fair.

Among his three wives, Wu Tingfang is the most boisterous. She clapped and shouted nonstop at the performances.

Xiang Shaolong was about to say something to Teng Yi when he noticed his

brows furrowed. Curious, he implored: “Is something bothering Second Brother?”

Teng Yi composed himself and replied in a deep voice: “I was just wondering – Lu Buwei has such a confident demeanour; isn’t he concerned that Lu Gong, Xu Xian and you might summon the Qin army to annihilate him? Although he is protected by first rate fighters, they are only numbering around one hundred. Even with a few more Guan Zhongxie, he is considered careless about his personal security.”

Xiang Shaolong guessed: “I think he is sure that I cannot manipulate the palace guards to attack him. Moreover, the Crown Prince will protect him as the new Premier Mentor and he knew that we will not act hastily.”

Teng Yi shook his head: “This is unlike Mo Ao’s usual methods. From the start, they have always been one step ahead of us while we are struggling to defend ourselves from them. In such a crucial juncture, it is less likely that they will be neglectful.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that his words make sense and began to think deeply too.

Teng Yi stared at the grandstand opposite them where Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei are sitting and shifted his gaze to Prince Dan and Tian Dan beside them. He mused: “It is such a grand occasion. Why is Tian Dan’s favourite general Dan Chu absent?”

Xiang Shaolong gestured Wu Yan Zhu and Wu Shu to his side and instructed

them to spy on the Qi people, smiling: “It is no use thinking about it. Let’s spy on them and see what is going on.”

On his other side, Wu Tingfang elbowed him: “That’s great! Hubby! Look! It is Little Jun!”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were rejuvenated and looked down to the assembly ground.

Under Jing Jun’s leadership, a few hundred cavalry soldiers rode out. Half of them are from the Wu Family Elite army. Everyone has a lance in their right hand and a shield in their left hand. Using only their legs to control their horses, they performed a variety of stunts and poses.

Jing Jun is even more imposing. Barking command after command, he directed his men with utmost confidence, evoking loud cheers and whistles from the crowd.

The female warriors were squeezed on one side of the crowd and they acted as Jing Jun’s cheerleaders under the leadership of Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er.

On the grandstand, Lu Gong and the other military leaders nodded their heads in acknowledgement and praise. Once in a while, they will pass favourable comments.

In these warring times, only a well-trained army can gain their attention.

Zhao Zhi happily cried: “Little Jun is really something!”

Suddenly, the soldiers split into two groups and carried out a mock attack on each other. As the horses brush past each other, sounds of weapons clashing can be heard. After a few exciting demonstrations, everyone in the crowd has shouted until their voices were hoarse.

After the final clash, both groups combined into one group and face the grandstand resolutely. At the head of the group is Jing Jun armed with a shield and a lance. He first stood up on his saddle and executed a somersault over the horse's head. While in mid air, his shield was moving rapidly to protect his body while he pierced his lance several times at an invisible enemy. When he finally landed, he kneeled down in a swift motion and paid his respects to Xiao Pan. It was a fluid movement altogether and there was no sign of breathlessness from him.

The crowd exploded into their biggest cheers and applause since the beginning of the night performances. Even the cold Qin Qing could not hold back and cheered for Jing Jun too.

Xiao Pan saw that he is Xiang Shaolong's sworn brother and is highly-skilled at the same time. Delighted, he actually jumped up, withdrew his personal sword and threw it down to the ground.

Jing Jun picked up his sword joyfully and howled another command. The cavalry troops marched neatly out of the assembly ground while he himself ascended the grandstand to claim his reward.

Xiang Shaolong could see that the crowd is still high after Jing Jun's performance. He turned his head to Ji Yanran and suggested: "If Talented

Lady Ji will perform her incredible spear technique, I guarantee that the crowd will cheer loudly for you.”

Ji Yanran and Qin Qing looked at him at the same time. With two of the world’s most beautiful faces looking at him simultaneously, Xiang Shaolong was aroused.

Ji Yanran batted her eyes at him: “Yanran only needs Hubby’s love and not the crowd’s cheering.”

Xiang Shaolong shifted his gaze to Qin Qing. She shot him a look and turned her face back to face the assembly ground.

After a few performances by the Palace Infantry and the Palace Cavalry, Ying Ying’s female warriors took to the stage.

They may not be as well trained as Jing Jun’s cavalry army but the two hundred young girls have their fair share of horse riding and archery experiences. Viewing their performance is also one of life’s pleasures.

Among the crowd, the girls are clapping non-stop and the guys are even more generous with their cheering. Naturally, the cheering is even louder than the cheering for Jing Jun.

A gong was sounded.

Lu Gong stood up and paid his respects to Empress and Crown Prince. He proceeded to announce the main event of tonight – the Sword Duel.

As the crowd became serious, he solemnly barked: “Whoever can win three consecutive fights will be rewarded with ten taels of gold from the Crown Prince. You may even win a promotion. Gentlemen, show us what you are made of!”

Under thunderous applause, two men scrambled out.

Lord Changping and several palace guards stepped forward and helped both men put their armour on and each man is given a wooden sword.

After the two men bowed to each other, they began fighting. Within three strokes, one of the men was hit by his opponent.

A gong was sounded and Xu Xian the referee announced the winner.

After ten over fights, only a young man named Huan Qi managed to win three consecutive fights and he earned loud cheers from the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong is trying to locate Guan Zhongxie among the crowd. To Teng Yi, he checked: “Will Second Brother enter the fight later to test Guan Zhongxie’s skills?”

Teng Yi smiled: “Why not?”

Both men exchanged a smile as another man entered the duelling ground. It is Lao Ai.

There are not many people who recognized him but they were impressed

with his sturdy built, imposing air and alert expression. It was only until he announced his position and name did everyone realised that he is the Empress's pet Inner Custodian Lao Ai.

In this instant, another man entered the duelling ground. Everyone is surprised at the challenger. Apparently, it is the expert swordsman Lu Chan. This man is one of the best fighters from Lu Buwei's group after Guan Zhongxie.

Teng Yi observed: "This will be spectacular. Lu Buwei is purposely out to ruin his reputation and put him down."

Xiang Shaolong focused on the grandstand and noticed the concerned expressions of Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lu Gong, Xu Xian, etc. He was glad that Lu Buwei is now officially opposing Lao Ai. If not for the body armour, Lu Buwei would have instructed Lu Chan to injure Lao Ai's groin and destroy his usefulness to Zhu Ji.

Lu Chan has a rigid face, a fierce demeanour and is dark-skinned. Whoever sees him would be frightened by his appearance. After they have put on their armour, both men circled the assembly ground once and are viewing each other with caution.

Ji Yanran sighed: "Lu Buwei is familiar with Lao Ai's strengths and weaknesses. Since he sent Lu Chan, he must have a high chance of winning."

Xiang Shaolong saw the Lu Chan is expressionless and hard to fathom. He nodded: "This man's strength should lie in forceful attacks. Lu Buwei must

have wanted him to attack Lao Ai relentlessly and make Lao Ai lose face in front of everyone. This will lower Lao Ai's standing in the eyes of Zhu Ji and the people of Qin."

Before he can even finish speaking, Lu Chan roared and attacked Lao Ai.

Qin Qing praised: "Official Xiang is truly a genius to make such accurate predictions." No one spoke out anymore as everyone is fixated on the intense fighting.

Sounds of the wooden sword swishing through the air filled everyone's ears. Everyone held their breaths as they witnessed the most intensive fight since the beginning of the duels.

Lao Ai may realise that his arm strength is not as good as Lu Chan or he is out to waste Lu Chan's energy. He did his best to avoid his blows and did not meet his attacks head on.

Until Lu Chan's fourth stroke brushed past his head did Lao Ai roar loudly and deflected his blows. He focused on defending and deflecting his blows rather than attacking him.

Lu Chan's killing aura grew and he changed his sword styles, attacking Lao Ai mercilessly.

Lao Ai changed his sword styles too and defended himself well. He deflected his blows and retreated at the same time. After circling the assembly ground a few rounds, their steps were still firm and did not show any signs of

exhaustion.

It is truly different when expert swordsmen fight.

Ying Ying's female warriors are impressed with Lao Ai's handsome looks and began cheering for him. Whenever he executed a skilful defensive stroke, they will cheer wildly for him. Teng Yi sighed: "Lu Chan has been tricked!"

Xiang Shaolong knew what he meant. Lu Chan and Lao Ai's swords skills are about the same level. Lu Chan has superior arm strength while Lao Ai is more agile. From the ongoing battle, it appears that Lao Ai is gaining the upper hand while Lu Chan is losing his energy very quickly. When he is exhausted, it will be Lao Ai's opportunity to defeat him.

Zhao Zhi was astonished: "Why didn't Lu Buwei send Guan Zhongxie?"

Xiang Shaolong looked over to her and noticed the Tian sisters nervously keeping their eyes closed as they were too afraid to watch the fighting. He cannot hold back but smiled: "Sending Guan Zhongxie will be the final straw."

Lu Chan is anxious to win and increased the intensity of the fight. Everyone is taken aback by his ferocity and their eyes followed his movements. Sounds of heavy clashing of the wooden swords filled the air.

Lao Ai suddenly stopped retreating and yelled madly. Like an angry dragon rising from the sea, his sword sliced forward and with a loud 'Pak!' he actually forced Lu Chan to retreat half a step. He continued with a flurry of attacks that sent Lu Chan into a defending position. Loud cheers and whistles

were heard from the crowd.

Teng Yi shook his head and sighed: “There are so many advantages if you are handsome.”

Lao Ai’s attacks became more and more fearsome and his sword is almost everywhere, forcing Lu Chan to take several steps back. But Lu Chan has high endurance. Despite being at a disadvantage, he did not panic and everyone is also impressed with his resilience.

Out of the blue, Lao Ai ceased his attacks and took a few steps back. He bowed: “Brother Lu is highly-skilled. I cannot hope to defeat you.”

The entire crowd quietened down.

Lu Chan was stunned for a while before he returned his greetings. Both men then paid their respects to the grandstand.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi glanced at each other. They did not expect Lao Ai to end this beautifully. He gave face to Lu Buwei and at the same time, he retreated when he was gaining the upper hand. Otherwise, if Guan Zhongxie challenges him in the next round, he will be in deep 5hit.

Xu Xian decided that it is a draw and rewarded each man with five taels of gold. The crowd was slightly disappointed.

Fortunately, the next fighters were all experts from the cavalry army and the palace guards. After several battles, the last fighter is Great General Wang

He's Assistant General Bai Chong who has beaten two challengers. If he can win one more round, he will win the ten taels of gold.

Xiang Shaolong felt that the present fighters are all men from prestigious backgrounds, causing all his cavalry soldiers to hold back from participating. He commented to Teng Yi: "Guan Zhongxie should be fighting soon!" Teng Yi reminded: "Not so fast! There is still Zhou Zihen!"

Before his sentence ended, a short and stout Zhou Zihen stepped out of the crowd and entered the duelling ground.

Everyone witnessed Bai Chong's double victory and guessed that he will too defeat this nameless man. Energized by this thought, they cheered even louder and the atmosphere is electrifying.

As everyone watched on, Zhou Zihen lifted the wooden sword and tested its weight. Abruptly, he brandished a dagger and swiftly sliced downwards. The end of the long sword was severed off, leaving only one and a half feet of sword length.

Everyone was blown away by his way of shortening his sword. Moreover, he used a small dagger to sever the heavy wooden sword in one blow and it takes a very sharp dagger to achieve that. Everyone was flabbergasted.

Zhou Zihen begged Xiao Pan's pardon: "Please forgive me as I am used to using short swords." Xiao Pan's interest was piqued and he gestured his approval.

Bai Chong has a suspicious look on his face as he brandished his sword and awaited his attack. With a serious expression, he was ready to counterattack anytime.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong deemed him to be a coward.

There is a saying: An inch shorter is an inch of danger. If Zhou Zihen is using such a short sword, his sword skills would be unorthodox and hard to defend against.

With only these two fighters, Lu Buwei is already instilling fear in others. Moreover, he still has Guan Zhongxie the champion swordsman.

Zhou Zihen snorted and moved forward at lightning speed. His wooden sword has morphed into a flurry of quick sword stances and his sword seemed to be everywhere. Clashing head on with Bai Chong, this is the first time anyone has seen such a queer move.

Bai Chong was stunned and roared. He took half a step back before sweeping his sword horizontally across.

Du! Zhou Zihen's short sword parried away Bai Chong's long sword while his entire body crashed squarely into Bai Chong's chest.

Bai Chong was taken by surprise and suffered a heavy blow to his chest. He lost his grip on his long sword and he fell down in a sitting position.

Nobody expected Bai Chong to lose in one blow and everyone forgot to

cheer.

Wang He and Bai Chong were disgraced while Lu Gong and the other generals were embarrassed. It was an awkward moment.

Finally, Lu Buwei took the lead in clapping and cheering for Zhou Zihen.

Like a dishonoured man, Bai Chong stood up and walked away.

Xiang Shaolong sucked in some cold air. He deduced that Zhou Zihen is someone well-versed in fighting at close proximity and he may have a hard time fighting him himself.

The atmosphere was tensed as Zhou Zihen proudly stood at the centre of the duelling ground, awaiting the next challenger. After some time, there were still no takers. Xiang Shaolong caught sight of Lu Buwei talking to Zhu Ji and he must have been bragging about his skilful subordinate. He had a brainwave and inquired: "Where is Little Jun?"

Teng Yi had the same inspiration that only Jing Jun's agility can counter Zhou Zihen and groaned: "I do not know where he has sneaked off to. Without our consent, he dared not fight."

At this time, Xu Xian announced from the grandstand: "If there are no more challengers, we will assume that Zhou Zihen from Premier Lu Residence has won three consecutive fights."

The crowd became so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. If Zhou Zihen ‘won three consecutive fights’, the military would lose face as they cannot even defeat someone from Lu Buwei’s forces.

At the instant, someone shouted: “Where is Commander Xiang?” The moment the shout ended, the crowd of ten thousand people were chanting his name.

Ever since his duel with Wang Jian, he has been the number one swordsman in the eyes of the people of Qin. Moreover, he is a ‘Qin native’. With this outsider arrogantly waiting for a challenger, everyone naturally hope that he will take the stand and regain some glory.

Cries of ‘Xiang Shaolong’ filled the mountains and valleys.

Xiang Shaolong saw that everyone around him was now staring at him. He was agonized. Even without his leg injury, it will be a difficult task to overcome Zhou Zihen. Now that his movement is limited, what should he do?

Chapter 08

The Mighty Jing Jun

On the grandstand, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan have unnatural expressions on their faces as they did not expect Xiang Shaolong to enjoy such high standing among the people of Qin. In addition, Lu Buwei can clearly feel the racism of the Qin people against him and his family warriors. He felt a tinge of regret for trying to eliminate Xiang Shaolong. If they had been on good terms, the people of Qin may eventually accept him and he need not use Lao Ai to manipulate the Empress. He suppressed this thought from his mind. After all, Xiang Shaolong has only two more days to live and it is a fact that cannot be changed.

Xiao Pan saw that Xiang Shaolong enjoys a favourable reputation among the military forces and the younger generation of Qin and was delighted for him. At the same time, it indirectly lowers Lu Buwei's standing. However, he was concerned about his leg injury and that he will disappoint the crowd by being unable to battle. While everyone is shouting his name incessantly, a figure somersaulted from within the ranks of the female warriors. This person cart wheeled continuously over ten rounds quickly and his face is a blur. No one can identify him but everyone was flabbergasted at his agility.

After a final mid air somersault, the person landed in front of the grandstand, kneeled down and pleaded: "Assistant Cavalry Commander Jing Jun asks to fight on behalf of my Commander. Will the Crown Prince please give your approval?"

Xiao Pan was overjoyed: “I approve Assistant Commander Jing’s request.”

Everyone saw that he was highly-skilled and volunteered himself first. Moreover, he is Xiang Shaolong’s assistant commander and rewarded him with thunderous applause. Everyone anticipates a good fight between him and Zhou Zihen.

Jing Jun did not stand up yet. He loudly declared: “If I happened to win, all the glory of the victory belongs to Miss Dan’er.”

Xiao Pan was stunned and exchanged a glance with an equally shocked Lu Gong. He laughed: “Fine! I approve.”

The people of Qin are open-minded. Witnessing the public love declaration of Jing Jun, everyone’s spirits rose greatly and cheered even louder. Their cheering sounds resonated throughout the plains.

The female warriors are laughing uncontrollably. Ying Ying and the other ladies forcefully pushed an embarrassed but thrilled Lu Dan’er to the front of the crowd so that she will not miss any part of the action.

Zhou Zihen still maintained his cool expression. He slowly glanced up at Lu Buwei who nodded slightly, indicating that he wants him to deal a heavy blow to Jing Jun and tarnish his reputation. He smiled to acknowledge this silent command. His eyes were shining like electricity as he shifted his gaze to Jing Jun who is putting on his armour and receiving his wooden sword.

Unexpectedly, Jing Jun made a monkey face, stared straight back at him and

joked: "So Brother Zhou needs to seek Premier Lu's consent for every little thing."

Zhou Zihen was taken aback as he did not anticipate Jing Jun to see through their communication method. He plainly replied: "Assistant Commander Jing must be joking!"

Lord Changwen is personally helping Jing Jun to put on his armour. Overhearing their conversation, he lightly patted Jing Jun and advised: "Be careful!" He led his men to the side of the duelling ground and left the two men standing there facing each other.

The crowd became silent as everyone watched with abated breaths, wondering how Jing Jun can counter Zhou Zihen's unorthodox fighting methods.

There may be ten thousand pairs of eyes staring at him and it will be a crucial fight but Jing Jun maintained his aloof expression and stared lazily at his opponent. His sword is still resting on his shoulder and he seems to disregard Zhou Zihen.

While everyone is anxious for him, the most anxious person is not Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi or any of the ladies. It is Lu Dan'er. She may be annoyed at him but now, her reputation is tied to the outcome of this battle. If Jing Jun loses, she will lose face too. Her palms became sweaty and she almost cannot continue watching the fight.

Out of the blue, both men began to move.

Originally, it was Zhou Zihen who moved first. But like it has been prearranged, the moment he made his move, Jing Jun's sword has left his shoulder and is now halfway through the air.

Zhou Zihen withdrew his sword and kicked out at the same time. Jing Jun somersaulted to the back and avoided his blow effortlessly.

Zhou Zihen was taken aback at this peculiar move. He is an experienced fighter and he knew that Jing Jun's strength lies in his agility. He dared not be complacent and instantly changed his battle tactics. He quickly rolled forward to where Jing Jun is about to land. When Jing Jun is landing, he will deal a heavy blow and break his legs.

The ever-changing fighting techniques have captivated everyone.

On the slope, Teng Yi smiled to Xiang Shaolong: "If Zhou Zihen is a few years younger, Jing Jun will be in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head slightly and focused hard on their fight without replying.

Jing Jun flipped twice in the air and actually has his hand embracing his legs against his chest. At the same time, his sword swished down at Zhou Zihen below him with lightning speed.

Zhou Zihen used his waist to prop himself up and flipped to the side. Using his backhand, he struck out with his short sword at chest area to hit Jing Jun's long sword.

Every one of their attacks was beyond comprehension and everyone was watching intently without any sounds.

Jing Jun knew that he is trying to deal a heavy blow to his long sword and use this opening to further attack him. He let out a shrill cry and his leg kicked out towards Zhou Zihen's face forcefully.

Zhou Zihen is blown away by his agility and could not be bothered to attack his long sword anymore. He shifted his sword to attack his leg. At the same time, he took a step backwards to avoid the incoming kick.

Amazingly, Jing Jun has enough momentum to retract his kick and Zhou Zihen's sword hit empty air.

Everyone roared out in loud cheers and praises.

As Jing Jun landed, he rolled into a ball. Keeping the momentum, he rolled towards Zhou Zihen.

Zhou Zihen did not panic and roared. He adopted the horse stance and his sword exploded into a flurry of stances. Under the illumination of the torches, he maintains his steely expression and is truly an expert swordsman.

After all, he needs true talent to outshine the other eight thousand family warriors of Lu Buwei.

As impossible as it seems, Jing Jun leapt up from the ground and struck down at Zhou Zihen with his full body weight.

Ta! The wooden swords clashed.

Even with his solid horse stance, Zhou Zihen cannot withstand Jing Jun's heavy blow and staggered backwards.

Everyone forgot their inhibitions and shake their fists in the air, cheering loudly for him. The loudest cheers come from Lu Dan'er and the female warriors followed by the soldiers from the Cavalry Army. Lu Buwei and his men's cheering were drowned by their voices.

Jing Jun fought ferociously. The moment he landed, he flipped forward with his long sword trailing and he followed up with another blow at Zhou Zihen.

Zhou Zihen is forced to defend himself and kept retreating. He cannot keep up with Jing Jun's flexible attacks that sometimes come from the air and sometimes when he was rolling on the ground. He has finally met his nemesis.

Under Jing Jun all out combo attacks, Zhou Zihen was panting as he tried to defend himself without the slightest chance to counter attack. Like a flower that has withered, he cannot salvage the situation.

Ta! Ta! Ta! Jing Jun made use of the advantage of his sword length to deliver three continuous blows to Zhou Zihen's short sword, causing him pain and numbness in his hands.

Everyone is siding Jing Jun in their cheers, causing Zhou Zihen to be mad and disappointed.

After another ten successive clashes, Zhou Zihen finally lost his grip on his sword and his sword flew out of his hands after receiving another heavy blow. As he groaned to himself, Jing Jun sidestepped to his back and delivered a back kick to his back.

Jing Jun's kick carried so much strength that Zhou Zihen can never block given his disadvantageous situation. Before he realised what happened, he has fallen flat on his face.

Lu Dan'er joyfully ran from the sidelines to Jing Jun's arms and they paid their respects to the boisterous crowd. No one is bothered with the defeated warrior leaving the duelling ground.

After a short discussion, Xu Xian happily asked: "Is Assistant Commander Jing ready for another challenger?"

Jing Jun respectfully answered: "I only fight on behalf of my Commander. I wish to end here while I am still the winner and have no desire to be kicked out by someone else!"

Everyone burst out laughing but no one blamed him for not accepting new challengers. Xu Xian smiled: "Assistant Commander Jing has done well. Have a good rest!"

Jing Jun paid his respects to the grandstand occupants and went back to the female warriors group with Lu Dan'er.

On the slope, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a smile. With Jing Jun's

success, he will win the heart of Lu Dan'er sooner or later.

Teng Yi state in a deep voice: "It seems like Guan Zhongxie will not fight tonight. As long as he did not defeat you or Jing Jun, he is still not the best swordsman in the eyes of the people of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. He was interrupted by Wu Shu who came up behind them with a flustered look on his face. He anxiously reported: "The people of Qi have packed their luggage and are ready to go home."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were stunned. They looked at the grandstand and noticed that Lu Buwei and Tian Dan have indeed disappeared.

All of a sudden, they realised that they have been tricked by Mo Ao and Tian Dan.

Tian Dan's decision to leave Xianyang City tonight is exploiting Xiang Shaolong's greatest weakness.

Lu Buwei must have anticipated that he will chase after Tian Dan. This will ensure that the Wu Family Elite warriors leave Xianyang City together with him and when he dies of poisoning on the trip, Lu Buwei will not be implicated. After his death, he can even accuse him of neglecting his duties and take over the Wu Family assets. Lu Buwei the heartless man will stand to benefit with this course of events.

Ji Yanran and the other ladies will have to submit to him. What a devious

plot!

Without Xiang Shaolong here to counter him, he will have lesser obstacles in pursuing his ambitions. When Guan Zhongxie is reinstated, he can promote him to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander as well. Everyone in Xianyang City will have to dance to his tune by then.

But how can he simply watch Tian Dan escape? Ever since Tian Dan tried to assassinate him, he has been keeping a low profile. He must be secretly planning this escape route. Thus, he must have been conspiring with Lu Buwei all along.

During his assassination, Lu Buwei swore that he did not have time to inform Tian Dan. It is all bullsh1t. In fact, he was the one who told Tian Dan to assassinate him.

This is called ‘inflicting injury on oneself to trick the enemy’. When everyone thinks that it is Lu Buwei’s enemy trying to kill him to get Lu Buwei into trouble, it was actually Lu Buwei who masterminded his assassination.

He has been too careless and was tricked by Lu Buwei. He even suspected Wang Wan or Cai Ze to be in cahoots with Tian Dan, which resulted in his oversight.

Teng Yi solemnly suggested: “Let me go after him! You must stay here to deal with Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Lu Buwei may not be able to send his own

men to escort Tian Dan but Tian Dan has an army of four thousand men which matches the strength of our own army. After taking Lord Gaoling's rebellion into consideration, I can only give you two thousand warriors. This makes both situations unfavourable for us. Don't forget that Lu Buwei has eight thousand family warriors. Who knows what tricks are up their sleeves?"

Teng Yi kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "But there is still hope in this matter. I must persuade Prince Dan first. As long as he can try to delay Tian Dan's journey, we can catch up to him. After all, An Gu has promised to make the Chu and Qi army retreat by ten miles away from the border."

There are no more challengers going up the duelling grounds so amidst all the fanfare, Xu Xian announced the end of tonight's performances.

In the main tent of Yan, Prince Dan listened to Xiang Shaolong's explanation and hesitated: "It is inappropriate for us to act alone on this matter. In anything goes wrong, Qi and Chu will come after us. With the three allied states not providing any assistance, our state of Yan will be in peril!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Tian Dan's existence is the real danger to the state of Yan. I am not asking your men to fight Tian Dan openly but to create opportunities to disrupt his travelling once he leaves the Qin borders. As long as you can delay him for a few days, we will catch up to him."

Pausing, he strengthened his tone: "I will send my men to liaise with your general Xu Yi Luan. At the time, the people of Wei and the Pass Commander

General An Gu will also lend us a helping hand.”

Listening in on the side, military advisor You Zhi advised: “This can be done. As long as we lay traps and conduct night raids, Tian Dan cannot tell whether his attackers are from Commander Xiang’s forces or not. Even if Tian Dan manages to escape with his life, he will not be able to pin the blame on us.”

Great General Xu Yi Ze came in from outside and bellowed: “No one is stalking Commander Xiang.”

Prince Dan was relieved and decided: “Fine! We will do our best to delay the meeting between Tian Dan and the two armies of Qi and Chu. If we do not see Commander Xiang by the time they meet up, we shall have to let that traitor live for a few more years.”

Xiang Shaolong profusely gave his thanks. He secretly thought that everyone has their own secret weapons. Even with Mo Ao’s brilliance, he can never expect Xu Yi Luan’s wandering army to come into the picture. After two days, his brilliant mind with cease to exist.

After he left Prince Dan’s tent, he glanced around him and saw that there are still burning torches everywhere. The young men and women of Qin are gathered in groups, singing, dancing and drinking to their heart’s content. It was a joyous time and no one wanted to go back to sleep.

On his way back to his tent, he was distracted by happy cheering of some young ladies. He looked in the direction of the sounds and saw a large purple flag about a hundred yards away from him and was reminded about Ying

Ying's appointment.

Will Ying Ying be waiting for him in the tent with the purple flower? There are still two hours until daybreak and she must be having a good time with Lu Dan'er and her female warriors.

After learning about Tian Dan's departure, he was disillusioned and wanted to discuss with Teng Yi who they should send to liaise with Xu Yi Luan to attack Tian Dan.

Somehow, he felt like paying a quick visit to Ying Ying's tent!

Thinking about this, he made use of the shadows of the tents and slipped towards Ying Ying's tent. He hoped to speak to her privately. Otherwise, if he gets intertwined by the female warriors, he will be stuck there for hours.

As most of the people are gathered around the assembly grounds, the tents were not well-illuminated. Without much difficulty, Xiang Shaolong managed to find his way around the tents without anyone detecting his presence

On an open area, he saw ten odd campfires. Enjoying themselves around the campfire were Lu Dan'er and over a hundred female warriors. They were accompanied by over two hundred young men and they are having a good time singing, clapping, dancing and flirting. Ying Ying was surprisingly absent.

Xiang Shaolong sighed, thinking that he may want to skip the appointment. As he stepped backwards, he saw a light coming from a tent behind him and there were some sounds coming from it.

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look and discovered that there was a large purple flower sewn on the tent door which looked exactly like the one on the flag.

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong walked over and was about to call her name. He changed his mind and since he wanted to win her heart, he will sneak into her tent and give her a surprise. She is an open-minded girl who is used to surprising others so she should not mind. He can then make love to her and win her affections without waiting till daybreak.

Aroused, he stepped into the tent.

A large figure which was prone on the floor leapt up swiftly and viciously howled: "Who is it?"

As Xiang Shaolong faced this person, both of them were equally shocked. Under the illumination of the lamp, it was a naked Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie saw that it was him and a murderous look flashed across his eyes. He moved to one side and began to put on his clothes.

Xiang Shaolong looked down and saw horrified Ying Ying sitting up under the cover of a blanket. Her face was deathly white and she stared at him with a lost expression. Beyond the blanket, her jade white legs can be seen.

In his wildest dreams, Xiang Shaolong did not expect that they will be making out in the tent. He bitterly laughed: "My apologies!" and left the tent.

After he took several steps, Guan Zhongxie chased up to him and apologised: “Official Xiang. I am sorry. She said she is meeting you at daybreak and did not expect you to come so early.”

Xiang Shaolong is certain that he purposely seduced Ying Ying to sow discord between them and hated Ying Ying for being unable to resist him. He accepted his defeat and forced a smile: “It is my fault for spoiling Official Guan’s happy moment and even gave you a fright.”

Guan Zhongxie was astounded: “Hasn’t Official Xiang seen Premier Lu? Earlier, he sent someone to look for you.”

Xiang Shaolong casually responded: “I am walking everywhere aimlessly and I am afraid his men have not been able to locate me yet.”

Walking besides him, Guan Zhongxie whispered: “The ladies of Qin are very open minded even before marriage. I hope Official Xiang does not take it to heart!”

Xiang Shaolong thought that with these words, Guan Zhongxie is ridiculing Xiang Shaolong should he ever have the courage to wed Ying Ying. He pretended to be unaffected and laughed: “Official Guan must be joking.” Pleased, Guan Zhongxie recommended: “Let’s visit Premier Lu together!”

Xiang Shaolong is at a loss.

All along, he has been at the losing end because unlike his enemies, he did not resort to unscrupulous methods to achieve his goals.

He is a man of principles and values relationships. If he carries on like this, even with Mo Ao dead, he may still die in the hands of Guan Zhongxie.

It is time to change strategies.

Chapter 09

Blessing in Disguise

When Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie arrived at Lu Buwei's tent, he was seated outside the tent and enjoying the singing of two stunning courtesans. With him are Mo Ao, Lu Chan and ten over escorts. Zhou Zihen and Lu Niang Rong are not around.

Lu Buwei pretended to be happy to see him and instructed Xiang Shaolong to sit beside him. For the first time, he introduced Mo Ao and Lu Chan to him.

As Xiang Shaolong exchanged some meaningless conversation with Mo Ao and Lu Chan, Lu Buwei dismissed the courtesans and leaned towards him, revealing: "Tian Dan is leaving tonight. What does Shaolong plan to do? If you want to go after him, I will fully support you. He actually tried to harm me by trying to assassinate you. I will not protect him anymore."

Everyone stared at Xiang Shaolong, waiting for his reaction. Xiang Shaolong felt like he is an animal being surrounded by tigers and wolves.

They must be laughing inside that he is still ignorant about being poisoned by them.

Thoughts raced through his mind at the speed of light. If he decides to give up his decision to pursue Tian Dan, Mo Ao may be suspicious and deduced that he has a secret plan. But it would be ridiculous for him to chase after

Tian Dan now. He was in a dilemma.

Recalling his determination to ‘achieve his goals at all costs’, he acted awkward and divulged: “Actually, I wanted to kill Tian Dan because he killed a female friend that I got to know in Handan City. It turned out to be a misunderstanding as I received a letter from her yesterday. I am not really out to kill him but just wanted to scare him. This fellow has always been trying to kill me and it is lucky that he has failed in all his attempts.”

It is a complete lie to prevent Lu Buwei from forcing him to pursue Tian Dan and also give him an excuse not to pursue him himself. Fortunately, Tian Dan has left and there is no one to validate his words.

Lu Buwei, Mo Ao, Guan Zhongxie and Lu Chan all have a strange expression on their faces after hearing his words. After they exchanged glances, Guan Zhongxie began: “Why did Official Xiang think that the lady has been killed?”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Tian Dan did not tell them the full details. He was secretly delighted and told them about the weak-looking eyes in the painting compared to Shan Rou’s usual energetic eyes. He bitterly laughed: “I may have been too rash and concluded too early that she was killed without further thinking. When I received her letter yesterday, I realised that it was a complete misunderstanding. She did try to assassinate Tian Dan but managed to escape with her life. Naturally, I will not tell these things to Tian Dan!”

Lu Buwei shook his head and sighed: “We already know it is a misunderstanding. In actual fact, Tian Dan was puzzled that you concluded

that she was dead based on the painting. He saw that you were furious and did not clarify things with you.”

Mo Ao cut in: “The painting is drawn by one of Tian Dan’s artist from his memory. It is not unusual to draw the eyes incorrectly due to the short interaction.” Now, it is Xiang Shaolong who trembled strongly and he exclaimed: “What?!”

As everyone is staring at him with astonishment, he tried to cover up and asked: “Since Premier Lu knows about this, why didn’t you tell me earlier?” He tried to suppress his emotions so that his joy will not show up on his face.

Heavens!

So Shan Rou is really not dead. It is really a misunderstanding.

Lu Buwei leisurely replied: “I thought Tian Dan is spouting nonsense and is trying to use me to scare you so I did not bring it up. Now, we have proven that he has been lying all along.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that it made sense. But under those circumstances, there is no need for Tian Dan to lie to Lu Buwei. Moreover, it is not Tian Dan’s style to showcase his weaknesses. Thus, there is a high probability that Shan Rou is indeed alive.

Lu Buwei saw that he cannot persuade Xiang Shaolong to pursue Tian Dan and disappointment is written all over his face. He stood up and asked: “Shaolong! Will you visit Niang Rong in her tent? You may be able to

persuade her to change her mind.”

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to see Lu Niang Rong at all. He stood up together with Mo Ao and the rest and replied: “There is an early morning hunt tomorrow. Let Third Mistress have a good rest! I will see her again when she is feeling better tomorrow.”

It may be due to his failure to cajole him that Lu Buwei is in a terrible mood. He did not hold him back and allowed him to leave.

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Cavalry Camp near the Royal tents and saw Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Liu Chao in the middle of a secret discussion.

He pulled Teng Yi to one side first and told him about Shan Rou’s likelihood of being alive.

Teng Yi was mad with joy. He then frowned: “Then are we still going after Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong resolutely decided: “We must kill him to avenge the injustice done to the Shan Family. Moreover, Tian Dan has tried to kill me several times and is in cahoots with Lu Buwei. It is time to eliminate this threat once and for all! This present opportunity is once in a lifetime chance to kill him. If we missed it, it will be gone for good. No matter what, we must never allow him to return to Qi alive.”

He added with a smile: “Moreover, I made a vow that day to change my name to Long Shao Xiang if I did not kill him. It is such an ugly sounding

name!”

Teng Yi broke out into a smile and waved Jing Jun and Liu Chao to join them. He instructed Liu Chao: “Go ahead and explain your findings.”

Liu Chao reported: “We have discovered Lord Gaoling’s men building rafts secretly at the river upstream and are collecting large quantities of firewood and dried grass. I am sure that they are preparing to burn the bridges.”

Jing Jun added: “If they build shelves on the rafts and spray the entire raft with oil, it is tantamount to a live volcano speeding down the river towards us. Its destructive impact will be tremendous. Shall we attack them first to prevent this from happening?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “This time round, we need to put up a show to allow the Crown Prince to show off his godly ability in leading an army to war. We must project a favourable image of him in the hearts and minds of the people of Qin. This is called Branding. Only through this can we prolong our fight with Lu Buwei until the day he is coroneted.”

Teng Yi smiled: “You use really funny terms such as Godly Ability and Branding. But it does make sense to me.”

Jing Jun excitedly said: “I understand. We need to find out about the enemies’ schemes and plan a full counterattack strategy. The Crown Prince will issue military orders while pretending that this is a new encounter. Thus, he can convince everyone of his talent.”

Liu Chao mused: "So we must not only win but win beautifully."

Knowing the Shan Rou is still alive, Xiang Shaolong is in great spirits. "That's right!" he laughed.

He continued to praise: "We must win beautifully just like how Jing Jun beat Zhou Zihen beautifully."

Jing Jun gave his thanks and shone with pride.

Teng Yi joked: "Have you gotten Lu Dan'er's red flower?"

Jing Jun was agonized: "She is a tough one. She allowed me to hug and caress her but still refrain from letting me pass this final barrier."

Liu Chao is experienced with women and gleefully joked: "I think Master Jing is lacking in experience and may have made a few wrong moves."

Jing Jun laughingly scolded: "D@mn you. Do you think this is my first girl? My moves are always the best. Unfortunately, there is no way we can prove this by duelling. Hng! You are mistaken."

The other three men broke out into laughter.

Xiang Shaolong laughed as he agreed that no man will ever say that he is bad at chasing girls.

After knowing that Shan Rou is alive, Teng Yi is in an excellent mood. He

remembered something and reminded: “Yanran and the girls are in the royal tents accompanying Widow Qin. Tingfang wants you to fetch them before returning back to your tent.”

Jing Jun smiled: “Third Brother had better spend more time with sisters-in-law. Leave these tasks to us!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled as he chided him. Summoning the Eighteen Guardians, he rode towards the royal tents.

After entering the wooden gates, he ran into Xu Xian who is escorted by several men carrying torches. Together, they rode to one of the slopes to speak in secret.

Below them, tents were pitched everywhere on the plains. Despite the loud gushing sounds of River Jing, laughter and cheering can still be heard as there are still many people who have not retired to bed.

Xu Xian whispered: “For the past two days, Lord Gaoling has been trying to persuade me and Lu Gong to work join forces with him against Lu Buwei. He swore that he has no intention to usurp the throne but only wanted to force this outsider out of the Qin court.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Lord Gaoling can never return from this path that he is taking. Lu Buwei has spies around him and he is still ignorant about it. Based on this point, he will only suffer in the hands of Lu Buwei.”

Xu Xian reminded: “I am puzzled that Du Bi chose to leave Xianyang City

during such a crucial juncture. I guessed he knew about Lord Gaoling's rebellion and purposely left so that he can watch us from the sidelines. This man is extremely scheming and is much more talented than Lord Gaoling."

He added: "Is Shaolong really confident? Don't forget that Lu Buwei will create some internal chaos."

Xiang Shaolong confidently explained: "The Crown Prince will lead the fight personally and Lu Buwei will have no chance to interfere."

Xu Xian frowned: "The Crown Prince is still young and lack battle experience. I am concerned..."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Crown Prince only needs to know how to delegate his work to the correct persons."

Xu Xian saw through him and laughed: "Let's make it a practice round for him! When that happens, Lu Gong and I will stand on his left and right, showing everyone that he has our full support. Shaolong must plan everything well."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head joyfully.

Xu Xian praised: "Your fifth brother is highly-skilled and clever, undermining Lu Buwei's reputation. He is a rare talent whom Lu Gong and I admire very much. Right! Have you decided to give up your plan to kill Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot reveal his relationship with Prince Dan. He replied: "I

have asked the people of Wei to help me to delay his travelling speed. If they can hold him back a few days, I am sure I can catch up to him. When I am gone, Jing Jun will be in charge of the Cavalry Army. Please help me take care of him.”

Xu Xian was stunned: “Why would the people of Wei help you?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Except for Chu, the other states have some form of enmity with Tian Dan. Moreover, I was the one who freed the Crown Prince of Wei. Lord Longyang will surely lend me a helping hand in return.”

Xu Xian was satisfied with his answer and patted his shoulder to show his appreciation. They then parted.

At the defending gates, the door attendant informed him that Xiao Pan is looking for him. He went to look for Xiao Pan first.

Xiao Pan is in a secret discussion with Li Si and has a happy expression on his face. The moment he saw Xiang Shaolong enter his tent, he waved him over and together, they analyzed a map on the table. It was a map of the entire campsite. Lord Gaoling’s tents were marked in red.

Xiang Shaolong understood his excitement and is happy for him. It is a rare chance for him to command the Qin army and show his prowess.

Xiao Pan began: “Earlier, I have summoned Subject Jing (Jun) and he has told me the location of the rebel soldiers. I am now discussing a counter strategy with Subject Li. Subject Li, why don’t you explain first!”

Li Si is about to speak out when Xiang Shaolong kicked him lightly under the table. Li Si understood his meaning and reported: “I only contributed a small part and the majority of the plan was crafted by Crown Prince. Why don’t Crown Prince explain it instead?”

Xiao Pan was thrilled and smiled: “For Lord Gaoling to succeed, he must use unconventional methods and take us by surprise. With so much information about their plans, we must annihilate them or my study of military books would be in waste!”

He pointed to River Jing and detailed: “If I am Lord Gaoling, I will first make use of the natural surroundings to my advantage. For example, I can create dams and store water from the nearby rivers that connect with River Jing. When it is time to attack, I will open the dams and let the huge amounts of water flow downstream. The torrents will tear the bridges apart and with a timely attack, I can achieve victory.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. When Liu Chao mentioned he saw rafts being built, they can be used for building dams too. A water attack is even more powerful than a fire attack and there is no way they can prevent flooding. He could not help but turn to look at Li Si.

Li Si clarified: “I have nothing to do with this. This is really Crown Prince’s idea.”

Xiao Pan proudly continued: “Subject Li guessed that they will use a fire attack but I felt that a water attack is more powerful. If they add a few logs on the water, all kinds of bridges will be destroyed. Then, they only need to

shoot some fire arrows and our whole camp will be burnt to the ground.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at Xiao Pan’s intelligence. This is truly the first time he is fighting a war based on his own abilities.

Xiao Pan proceeded to explain the different scenarios where Lord Gaoling can send in his attackers and how Lu Buwei can try to kill his opponents using different strategies. His explanations made sense and both Xiang Shaolong and Li Si were completely blown away by his intricate thinking and rational explanations.

Finally, Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: “My biggest flaw is that I have too many scenarios with their own strengths and weaknesses. I have no idea which is the best plan. Will my two subjects please advise me?”

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and laughed: “The most powerful attack is the attack that always changes to suit the changing battle conditions. Crown Prince can rest at ease. When we know their attacking time, we will attack first and annihilate all of them before Lu Buwei even know what is going on. Leave this to the Changping brothers and myself. Then, Crown Prince only needs to issue the orders and we will put up a good show for everyone.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table and sighed: “Only Grand Tutor and Subject Li understands me. We shall do as you say!”

Li Si respectfully added: “Official Xiang and I will bring you the latest battle reports so that you can make the necessary changes.”

Pleased, Xiao Pan nodded his head. Changing the subject, he asked: “Grand Tutor’s Fifth Brother Jing Jun is a rare talent. He is skilful, loyal and honest. I admire men like him. Can Grand Tutor Xiang give any suggestions on how I may reward him?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “His official post is already quite high and still lacks real experience. We must let him hone his skills further before we promote him again.”

Xiao Pan smiled: “Is he really interested in Lu Dan’er? If Lu Gong does not object, I will see to their marriage. After all, it is better for her this way than to land in the hands of Guan Zhongxie the traitor.”

Xiang Shaolong recollected the ugly expression on Guan Zhongxie’s face as he leapt up from a naked Ying Ying. He felt like there were needles pricking his heart. He nodded: “I have to bother Crown Prince.”

Xiao Pan gladly assured: “It is my pleasure. For the time being, I am not interested in marriage as there are too many important things to do.”

When he left Xiao Pan’s tent, he ran into Lord Changwen and was detained by him and dragged to a corner. He cheered: “My sister is no longer hostile towards you. You must grasp the opportunity and win her heart. If you marry her, you will be relieving us of a big burden.”

Xiang Shaolong was very uncomfortable. Luckily, he was not deeply intertwined with Ying Ying yet or it will be a heavy blow to him. He remembered the one night stands in the 21st century and realised that what

Ying Ying is not that atrocious after all. Both males and females have the right to sleep around. The question is that in this case, it is Guan Zhongxie purposely out to seduce Ying Ying from him.

To Lord Changwen, he bitterly smiled: "I have lost. Can we stop talking about this?" Lord Changwen was astounded. "Guan Zhongxie?" he stammered.

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head slightly and patted his shoulder apologetically before he took his leave.

Qin Qing's tent is located behind the main royal tent and is beside Zhu Ji's tent. Here, there are ten odd tents which all belonged to the females of the royal family. Wooden walls are erected between these tents and the other tents and security is very tight.

Xiang Shaolong may have the authority to go wherever his wishes but he still respects their rules and announced his arrival to a palace guard. Soon, one of Qin Qing's personal maids came to report that Ji Yanran and the ladies have left and Qin Qing has retired for the night.

Xiang Shaolong understood that Qin Qing does not want to see him given the present circumstances. He shrugged his shoulders and left.

Chapter 10

Killing Four Birds With Two Arrows

Before dawn, Xiang Shaolong is roused from sleep by the Tian sisters.

He did not sleep a wink the night before and was working non-stop yesterday. He was so exhausted he slept like a log the moment he hugged Wu Tingfang in bed.

Outside the tent where it is still dark, Ji Yanran and his other two wives changed the medication on his wound. By now, the injury is almost completely healed except for a scar. He already has several scars on his body and an additional one is inconsequential.

This moment, Jing Jun led a young man to see him and introduced: “This is Huan Qi. Commander Xiang should have seen him yesterday. He is the best hunter from the first hunt yesterday and the only fighter to win three consecutive fights last night. The Crown Prince has promoted him to be a Major and assigned him to our Cavalry Army. Commander Xiang will be in charge of grooming him.”

Huan Qi knelt down and greeted: “Huan Qi pays his respects to Commander Xiang.”

‘No wonder he looked so familiar’, Xiang Shaolong thought. He gently instructed: “Stand up!” Like an agile leopard, Huan Qi sprang up from his

kneeling position.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has clear and shining eyes, a confident aura and a well-built body. He was tall, muscular and has an imposing air. Even with the three pretty wives besides himself, he did not stray his eyes to look at them. Pleased, he inquired: "Huan Qi, what is your background and do you have any military experience?"

Without hesitation, Huan Qi replied: "I come from the North and spend my youth studying martial arts and military warfare. I was a Captain serving General Wang Jian in the north as he protected our borders."

With a sincere expression, he awkwardly revealed: "It is General Wang Jian who sent me to represent the Border Guards in the hunting fair. General Wang advised me to seek out Commander Xiang should I ever get the chance to be promoted as Commander Xiang will be the right person who can groom me."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Based on Brother Huan's talent, it will be hard to keep you from excelling."

Huan Qi's face darkened slightly and he continued: "There is something Commander Xiang must know. My ancestors are from the Quanrong tribe. Thus, regardless of my achievements, I have always been overlooked when it is promotion time. If not for General Wang's support, I will still be a miserable sergeant. General Wang has the intention to promote me to become a Major but his recommendations are rejected by the military headquarters. Therefore, General Wang sent me here to try my luck and

instructed me to work for Commander Xiang at all costs.”

Xiang Shaolong came to realise that racism exists even within the people of Qin. He was thrilled. If Wang Jian recognizes this man to be talented, there is surely some substance in him. Additionally, Wang Jian must have learnt about his situation from Big Brother Wu Zhuo and as a result, he sent this capable man to assist himself.

Now that his leg has been bandaged properly, he stood up and grabbed his shoulder, swearing: “Brother Huan can rest at ease. I will never have a different opinion about you because of your ancestry. As long as you work hard and stay loyal to the state, I will see that you get what you deserved. From today onwards, you will be my Assistant Commander and I will issue you your letter of appointment within these two days.”

Huan Qi was stunned at Xiang Shaolong’s generosity and gratefully kneeled down and kowtowed.

Jing Jun held him up and smiled to Xiang Shaolong: “The moment I saw Brother Huan, we hit it off very well. I already told him that Commander Xiang will take good care of anyone recommended by General Wang Jian.”

Xiang Shaolong officially state: “Little Jun should not speak like that. I have absolute trust in General Wang’s judgement and moreover, Brother Huan did perform well at the hunting fair. That is why I gave him a chance to showcase his talent.”

Jing Jun winked at Xiang Shaolong, asking: “What should be his duties over

the next two days?”

Xiang Shaolong understood what he meant. Jing Jun was asking whether he can tell Huan Qi about Lord Gaoling and Lu Buwei's issues. After a short contemplation, he acknowledged that it is someone that Wang Jian sent to assist him and should be reliable. He hardened his heart and replied: “Since he is one of us, I see no reason to hide anything from him. Only when he has complete knowledge can he do his best.”

Huan Qi is so touched that he nearly cried. Jing Jun happily dragged him to see Teng Yi.

Ji Yanran came to Xiang Shaolong's side and predicted: “If Yanran is not mistaken, another capable General is about to surface in Qin.”

Different hunting groups led their hunting dogs to cross the wooden bridges over River Jing. They then spread out into the wide hunting grounds to begin the morning hunt.

Lu Buwei, Xu Xian, Wang He, Lu Gong, Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, Guan Zhongxie and other important officials are accompanying Xiao Pan on his hunt.

Zhu Ji is only interested in the first hunt.

Lord Changwen and Teng Yi are in charge of protecting the campsite while Jing Jun and Huan Qi went to spy on Lord Gaoling's rebel soldiers.

There is another hunting party made up of members of the royal family which includes Lord Gaoling and his escorts. Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi and the Tian sisters formed another group while Prince Dan and his men formed another group. They were spread out among the other groups on the hunting grounds.

Xiao Pan rode his horse towards a huge lake and was in great spirits.

Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Lord Changping followed him closely. Behind them are the rest of the officials.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Xiao Pan is slowly growing up to be a young man and assessed his extraordinary features and aura.

His most remarkable features are his two high and round cheekbones, making one feel subservient. It may be due to the numerous secrets that he is hiding that his eyes are becoming more and more mysterious looking. When he is looking straight at you, even Xiang Shaolong who is so familiar with him will feel his goose pimples standing. His lips are thick which does not make him handsome but his mouth is well-defined which gives people a sense of determination and resolution. As a result, his appearance is very different from other people and he does have a dominating aura around him.

As he continue to grow older, these attributes become more and more significant. Xiang Shaolong can no longer see any signs of the childish Xiao Pan he saw back in Handan Palace.

This future Qin Shi Huang shares a common height but he has wide shoulders

and his hands and feet are bigger than most people. When he moves, he carries an aura of might and invincibility. If there are any fortune tellers, they can easily tell that he is of noble birth.

At this point, there is a flock of water eagles that began to fly into the sky from the lakeside. Xiao Pan shot an arrow but only hit empty air. Xiao Pan laughed: "So many birds! Someone shoot them down."

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in these aimless killings and he watched as the other men began to shoot arrow after arrow.

Qiang! Xiang Shaolong eardrums resonated with a loud sound. Beside him, Guan Zhongxie took out his iron bow and rushed in front of everyone, shooting two arrows in succession. However, the bow only rang out once, showing his incredible firing speed.

Over a hundred arrows flew through the air.

The water eagles cry out tragically and twenty odd birds fell down from the sky.

The escorts quickly released the hunting dogs to bring the birds back. The loud barking of the dogs shattered the tranquillity of the plains.

Xiao Pan was ecstatic and rode towards the lakeside. Everyone has to follow him in his pursuit.

Xiao Pan finally stopped on a little hill that overlooks the entire lake.

As everyone stopped behind him, Lu Buwei rode up to his side and laughed: "The Crown Prince has good horsemanship!"

Prince Dan and his men arrived at the hill around the same time.

Xiao Pan smiled: "Thanks for your compliment. Look, our Qin has such beautiful scenery with large plains and abundant animals."

He pointed to the west mountains and continued: "Can every one of you see the famous western waterfall? It falls down from a height of a few hundred feet down and resembles a brocade of white silk. I can imagine that when the water finally land on the rocks below, the water will splash with a tremendous impact and become thousands of shimmering water drops."

Behind him, Xiang Shaolong glanced around the wilderness with interest. It is like a scene from a beautiful dream with the lake in front of them and the mountains in the background. The green vegetation and the mountains are stack in their natural layers, resembling a landscape painting. Although Xiao Pan is still a teenager, he is fully immersed in his role as the King of Qin. He is analyzing his territory with pride and joy.

Lu Gong came to the other side of Xiao Pan and described: "I often go there to hunt myself. When the waterfall finally reaches the bottom, it flows to the east and take a turn, running through two mountains and valleys. Finally, it will run in the southwest direction and form the west river. After another ten miles, it will merge with the Jing River. It is a spectacular sight to behold."

Xiang Shaolong scanned everyone's expression and saw that everyone was

intoxicated in their emotions. Only Prince Dan is eyeing Xiao Pan with suspicions. He was shaken and thought about Jing Ke's assassination. He secretly believed that this is the time when Prince Dan is beginning to harbour thoughts about assassinating Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan resolutely declared: "That shall be our goal for today. If I do not witness the splendour of the western waterfall personally, I will not be able to go to sleep tonight."

Xu Xian smiled: "If this is the case, we must set off now. It will take us six hours to go there and come back."

They were interrupted by the escorts and the hunting dogs who came back with the water eagles. In total, there were a total of twenty-seven birds that were shot down. The arrows are marked with names so everyone can tell who shot the most number of birds. There are two arrows that went through two eagles each. It is truly killing two birds with one arrow.

The birds are displayed on the floor for everyone's assessment.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the two arrows that killed the four birds are similar. Shocked, he stared at Guan Zhongxie.

Everyone is starting to notice the two special arrows.

Xiao Pan was astounded: "May I know who it is that possessed such amazing archery skill?"

Guan Zhongxie leapt down his horse and kneeled down, reporting: “Crown Prince, please do not mind my lowly skill.”

Lu Gong and Xu Xian exchanged a look and they have a concerned expression on their faces.

It is already very challenging to fire two arrows at the same time. It takes even more skill to shoot down four eagles with only two arrows. Among the hundred odd flying eagles, one must aim both arrows concurrently so as to score two kills each. It is a feat that cannot be topped.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his whole body turning cold. If they happened to duel, he would be unable to avoid his powerful arrows. Looks like Guan Zhongxie is superior to Teng Yi in both arm strength and archery skill.

Xiao Pan tried to hide his unnatural expression and forced a smile: “Subject Guan’s archery skill is peerless. I want to reward you. What suggestions do the rest of you have?”

Lu Buwei will not let this chance slip by. He smiled: “If Crown Prince can reinstate him to his former position, it will be good enough.”

Xiao Pan had agreed to this matter earlier when Empress had spoken to him about it. She wanted to support Lu Buwei and curb his ambitions. Xiao Pan nodded: “From this moment on, Subject Guan will resume his former duties and assist me in protecting Xianyang City.”

Guan Zhongxie hurriedly kowtowed with thanks.

Xiao Pan pointed his horse whip to the western mountains and exclaimed:
“Let’s race there!”

Leading the group of riders, he sped down the slope.

Short after noon time, Xiao Pan and his followers came back with their mission accomplished.

Back at the camp, Xiang Shaolong had some free time and went to find Li Si. He told Li Si about Huan Qi’s appointment and Li Si agreed wholeheartedly. Other than him, there is no one who knows how close Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong are.

Xiang Shaolong was amused.

When he came to this ancient world through the time machine, he did his best to locate Qin Shi Huang in Handan City so that he can gain his friendship and enjoy a life of luxury. After so many twists and turns, he became the one who ‘invented’ Qin Shi Huang. There is no other miracle bigger than this in the past or in the future.

Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi came up to him and were chirping non-stop like two little birds. They told him about the interesting stories during their own hunt and Xiang Shaolong praised them for their abilities. By now, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters have joined them.

While they were busy talking, the hunting groups are slowly returning back to camp.

At the main assembly ground, everyone is occupied with reporting their catch and inspecting the animals. Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi hurriedly joined in the fun.

Ji Yanran is very observant and told Xiang Shaolong: “Little Jun is back and is chatting with Lu Dan’er besides the assembly ground. Hubby, you can spend more time with Sister Fang and Zhi Zhi. I wish to take a nap back at our tent. When I wake up, let’s go for a shower in the river!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she has a habit of taking afternoon naps and consented.

After Ji Yanran left with Qin Qing and the Tian sisters, Xiang Shaolong jumped down his horse and instructed Wu Shu to bring his horse back to camp first. He finally saw Jing Jun with Lu Dan’er. Jing Jun appears to be saying some teasing words and Lu Dan’er is raining blows on him. Jing Jun turned around and allowed Lu Dan’er to hit his back. After a short while, her blows softened and nearby, the female warriors are laughing at them.

Xiang Shaolong is happy for them. “Commander Xiang!” Huan Qi came up to him.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and smiled: “Brother Huan, why didn’t you join Little Jun in having fun? Based on your talents, you should be highly regarded by the female warriors.”

Huan Qi paid his respects and answered: “This is the time for me to contribute to my country and I am not interested in women or family

planning. Hei! Commander Xiang can just call me Huan Qi.”

Xiang Shaolong reckoned this the difference between him and Jing Jun. One of them is a dedicated worker while the other is all out to enjoy life. He smiled: “How young are you?” Huan Qi respectfully responded: “I am nineteen.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “You are only one year older than Little Jun. I shall call you Little Qi!” He led him away from the assembly ground towards a secluded spot, enquiring: “Any new discoveries today?”

Huan Qi detailed: “Assistant Commander Jing and I went deep into the mountains to spy on the enemy. The weather has been good for the past few days and there is no fog. Thus, we can see everything very clearly. From what I observed, there is about ten thousand rebel soldiers but they are disunited and in disarray. Their formation is untidy; their banners are in a mess; they have tired looks on their faces; they dragged their feet wherever they go and their morale is very low. I only need one thousand elite soldiers to attack and overpower them.”

Xiang Shaolong was blown away: “How can Little Qi make so many conclusions with just half a day of spying?”

Like a different person altogether, Huan Qi explained: “Before a battle, it is important to observe the enemies’ activities from higher ground. From the small details, we can draw important conclusions about their strength and strategies. Lord Gaoling’s men may be hidden in the dense forests but we can still observe which areas of the forest are populated with birds and beasts

and which areas are void of them. From there, we can gauge the size of their camp and the number of men they have. We can proceed to look at the ground for clues. From the rising dust, I am sure that they are cutting trees and accumulating rocks to be used to attack us later.”

The more he spoke, the more enthusiastic he became. Squatting on the floor, he used some stones to display the enemies’ formation. He was extremely detailed and left nothing out, showing his extraordinary memory and observation skills.

Xiang Shaolong was moved: “If I give you a group of two thousand elite soldiers, what will you do? You must remember that you can only attack them after they have made the first move.”

Huan Qi stood up and used his leg to destroy the stone formations on the ground. He seriously state: “Besides knowing the food supplies and strength of the enemy, the most important thing is the motivation behind their fighting spirit. If we manage to convince them that their fight is meaningless, we will defeat them without losing a single soldier. Now, our enemy is inconvenienced by the river so their communication is hindered. They are based in the uncomfortable wet areas of the forest where there are many thorny plants. I am confident that they are ill-prepared which caused the soldiers to be exhausted and their morale to be low. We can attack them from the river and on land simultaneously. Even if they manage to destroy the bridges, there is no loss to us. We can fortify ourselves along the river and remain undefeated.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but improve his opinion about him. Jing Jun

may have other strengths which he cannot match but in terms of wisdom and military warfare, Jing Jun lags far behind him.

If these words come from Lu Gong or Xu Xian, it is to be expected. But Huan Qi is only nineteen and has such capabilities. There is only one word that can describe him: Genius.

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: "Let me bring you to see someone. When you see him, you must tell him everything you told me earlier. It will benefit your career in the future."

Huan Qi was astonished: "Who are you bringing me to see?"

Xiang Shaolong clapped his shoulder and pushed him towards the royal tents, laughing: "Of course to see the Crown Prince!"

Huan Qi trembled and halted. He lowered his head and muttered: "Why don't I tell you my ideas and you can report them to the Crown Prince?"

Xiang Shaolong continued to nudge him forward and smiled: "That would be wrong as I don't deserve the credit for your work. Stop hesitating. I like men who are easy-going."

Huan Qi is so touched his eyes start to redden. He sobbed: "No wonder General Wang always say Commander Xiang is the most generous man and the number one hero of our Qin Empire. I will never forget your kindness."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "It is what you truly deserve. I am just the introducer.

But you must remember that this round, we must make the Crown Prince show off his might in front of his people. We must not take any credit for ourselves. Understand?"

Huan Qi naturally understood and hurriedly nodded his head.

Chapter 11

The Special Elite Forces

Xiang Shaolong left Huan Qi in the royal tent with Xiao Pan and Li Si before he rushed back to the assembly ground to fetch his two alluring wives. He was too late and they had left already. When he was about to leave himself, Ying Ying appeared from the crowd and held onto his sleeve, dragging him to a spot near the river.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her expression was forlorn and is certain that she is feeling terrible inside. Therefore, she did not exhibit her usual stubborn characteristics.

Ying Ying did not say a single word until they reached a little wood near the river. She released him from her grip and turned around with her back facing him, whining: "I know that you must despise me now and regard me as a wanton woman."

Xiang Shaolong walked up to her and held her firm shoulders, turning her around slowly. Pressing her against a tree, he scanned her pretty face and saw large drops of tears flowing down her face. He smiled and use his sleeve to wipe her tears, coaxing: "Why would I despise you? Men can sleep around and so can women. Moreover, you are still a single girl. Didn't you say that you are more capable than men in all areas? Why are you so despondent now?"

Ying Ying was in a daze: “You really forgive me?”

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders: “It is human nature to react to seduction. When you are emotional, anything can happen. If you are really in love with Guan Zhongxie, I will give both of you my blessings and will not cause any trouble for you.”

These are his true and sincere thoughts. When he was still in the 21st Century, he knew many women who have multiple partners and he himself was one of their partners. Now, it is similar to the attitude of the Qin ladies so he need not take it too seriously. Although he did feel uncomfortable at the beginning, it is just a natural reaction. After some time, it did not really matter.

Some colour returned to Ying Ying’s face and she lowered her head, confessing: “Last night, I was only waiting for you. Somehow, he showed up and I succumbed to his seduction. I am really sorry. You are really willing to forgive me?”

If he can choose, Xiang Shaolong would not want to get involved in any new relationships. But to counter Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie, he must win Ying Ying’s heart no matter what happens. Moreover, he is not bothered about her personal life. Leaning forward and smelling her fragrance, he assured: “I still prefer your stubborn attitude. That is the real you.”

Ying Ying sighed: “But I still feel that I committed a wrongdoing. After all, I get to know you first. When I saw you in the market fighting off the bullies, I just cannot forget you. But you are so proud and indifferent! Ai! What should I

do? If he comes to look for me again, I am afraid I cannot resist him. Can you help me?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. He knew that Guan Zhongxie has achieved his goal. But making love to Ying Ying first, he has secured an irreplaceable place in her heart that makes it hard for her to resist him. If Ying Ying becomes pregnant, she will have to marry him. What will be the consequences if that happened?

The first to suffer will be the Lord Changping Brothers. Xiao Pan will be suspicious of them and their official posts will also be in peril.

The only way out is to satisfy Ying Ying in a love relationship or marry her officially. Then, Guan Zhongxie will be unable to interfere with her anymore.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Has Miss Ying tried bush games?"

Ying Ying was stunned: "What are bush games?"

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward to her ear and softly whispered: "That means making love in the wild."

Ying Ying's face became as red as a beetroot and she lowered her head and shook it furiously.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally teased her: "When you shake your head, does it mean that you have not tried it or is not willing to try it?"

Like an exploding volcano, Ying Ying leapt into his bosom and embraced his neck smiling sweetly: “I want to try but I can’t. My period is here.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “It is all right as this is considered the safety window.”

Ying Ying was taken aback: “What is a safety window?”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for spouting nonsense. Without explaining himself, he hugged her well-proportioned body and kissed her passionately for some time before releasing her. With her face and ears completely red from his teasing, Ying Ying returned back to the campsite.

When Ji Yanran woke up, she joined Wu Tingfang and the other ladies as they happily accompanied Xiang Shaolong out of the camp. They head to a nearby valley where there is a clear stream for them to take a bath. The Eighteen Guardians stood guard to prevent outsiders from peeping at them.

The ladies are not totally naked but are dressed in their undergarments and shorts. Xiang Shaolong is highly aroused when he saw all the exposed flesh.

The water is very clear and unique rock formations lined the sides of the stream. Among the rock formations are the tangled roots of wild trees that resembled a bonsai plant. At sunset, the golden rays of the sun shone through the leaves and reflected off the water in a stunning display. It is simply heaven on earth.

Listening to the girls squealing and playing, Xiang Shaolong rested on a piece

of rock and felt that he was in paradise.

Ji Yanran came to his side and squeezed into his bosom, asking: “When Hubby is going to assault Tian Dan, will you bring me along? Zhi Zhi already indicates that she must come along as this concern her family vengeance.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled Zhao Qian’s death and hesitated: “Is Tingfang coming along too?”

Ji Yanran replied: “Nope. She will stay behind to take care of Bao’er. Little (Tian)Zhen and Little (Tian) Feng will stay behind too.”

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and kissed her mouth, smiling: “So this has already been decided. How can I bear to reject your requests?”

Ji Yanran did not expect him to be so agreeable. To Zhao Zhi, she exclaimed: “Zhi Zhi, Hubby has given his consent.”

Zhao Zhi shouted with joy and swam up to him, presenting him with a passionate kiss.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Shan Rou. If she knows that they are going to attack her sworn enemy, she will be delighted. But where in the world is she?

At the evening banquet, Teng Yi finally came back and reported that Pu Bu and You Zhi (Prince Dan’s military advisor) have left this morning to meet up with Xu Yi Luan. They are escorted by over a hundred experts from the Wu

Family Elite Army.

Xiang Shaolong updated Teng Yi about Huan Qi's analysis of Lord Gaoling's rebel troops and added: "It seems like Lord Gaoling is truly useless. We will only need two thousand Cavalry soldiers and defeat him soundly. The palace guards will deal with Lord Gaoling and his escorts. When the rebellion is suppressed, Lu Buwei will not be able to reap any benefits. For the time being, let's not use our Elite Army yet or Lu Buwei will learn about its strengths."

Teng Yi suggested: "If that is the case, why don't I lead them to chase after Tian Dan first? It is better if I can get the official approval from the Crown Prince. Otherwise, there may be some misunderstandings with the border guards. Third Brother, the moment you can leave Xianyang City, you must join us as quickly as possible."

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "We shall act as planned. Second Brother has to travel through the night and must take care." Teng Yi assured: "I am someone who never underestimates my opponent. You can put your mind at ease."

They went to find Jing Jun and discussed things further before Xiang Shaolong rushed to attend the royal banquet.

As he climbed the slope leading to the Royal tents, he met some palace guards who are looking for him as ordered by Xiao Pan. He hastily entered the main royal tent. Xiao Pan is sitting alone beside a table and analyzing a map on the table.

When he caught sight of Xiang Shaolong, he gestured: "There is no one else. Master, please have a seat."

Recently, it is quite rare for them to meet up alone. Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart warming up. Sitting beside him, he remarked: "I am so happy to see you becoming a capable and useful man."

Xiao Pan praised: "Master is an excellent judge of character. First, there is Li Si, then Wang Jian, followed by Huan Qi. Huan Qi is someone we can definitely groom."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Don't forget Lao Ai." Both men exchanged a glance and started laughing.

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Why did Crown Prince suddenly mention Wang Jian?"

Xiao Pan explained: "Earlier, I questioned Huan Qi about Wang Jian's situation and learnt that Wang Jian has conquered large amounts of territories towards the west. Now, the terrified Xiong Nus are all hiding in their rat holes. He even rebuilt the Great Wall and accomplished many other feats. Unfortunately, his contributions have gone unreported because of Lu Buwei. He requested a transfer back to Xianyang City many times but was rejected by Lu Buwei. Hng! This man is a threat to me as long as he is alive."

Xiang Shaolong advised: "Most importantly, Crown Prince must bear with him for the time being. If you oppose him now, you may stand to lose out in the end. Even if we managed to eliminate him, there will be other rebels. The

best plan is to wait for him to eliminate all your opponents and then we will eliminate him for good.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “The moment he saw Lao Ai being promoted to be the Inner Custodian, he is out to ridicule him. He is an ambitious man and I am concerned that it will be hard to control him in the future. As he is on good terms with Empress, there are many officials that have pledged their loyalty to him.”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “Why don’t Crown Prince set up a special elite force that reports directly and only to you. Using training as an excuse, you can send them to stand guard at a place near Xianyang City. If there is any trouble, Crown Prince can easily command them back to the city and quash your enemies.”

Xiao Pan was revitalized: “You are right. As Master has said, governing authority comes after military might. But I only trust you and you are busy with the City defences. Ai, but this is the best plan. I am sure that there are Lu Buwei’s spies among the Cavalry and Infantry armies. In the future, there will be Lao Ai’s spies too. Only soldiers recruited outside Xianyang City can be trusted. By then, I will not be afraid of Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Why don’t we use Huan Qi and get Wang Ben to assist him. This is the safest plan.” Xiao Pan was surprised: “Wang Ben is only seventeen. Isn’t he too young?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “Because Huan Qi and Wang Ben are young, they are more courageous and loyal. They are fearless and Lu Buwei is nothing to

them. Now, we enjoy the support of Xu Xian and Lu Gong. Using the rebellion as an excuse, we will create this special elite force. Then, Crown Prince can summon Wang Jian back to the capital and replace the aging Meng Ao and Wang Ci. When the time is ripe, they can attack Lu Buwei. After Lu Buwei has been disposed of, full military control lies in your hands and everyone will have to submit to you.”

He had a good laugh and knowingly added: “You have Li Si to be your advisor and three powerful generals Wang Jian, Wang Ben and Huan Qi. The world will be yours.”

Curious, Xiao Pan asked: “Why didn’t Master mention about himself?”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his hand and patted his shoulder lightly: “After your mother’s death and Princess Qian’s tragedy, I have lost my fighting spirit. Now, I am staying put to help you. When you are fully in control of Qin, I will leave here for the northern plains and live the rest of my life in peace.”

Xiao Pan trembled uncontrollably: “Master, how can you leave me?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled helplessly and whispered: “I represent your past. It is only when I am gone can you truly forget your identity as Xiao Pan and conquer the world, becoming the first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang. If you respect me, you must accept this piece of advice.”

Dumbfounded, Xiao Pan stared at him for a while and repeated ‘Qin Shi Huang’ twice. Amazed, he asked: “Why are Master’s casual words so full of deep meanings?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely swore: “Trust me. In the future, the world will belong to you.”

Xiao Pan thought over his words and implored: “Is Master going to pursue Tian Dan?”

Xiang Shaolong recollected that Teng Yi is leaving tonight and quickly updated him. Lord Changping came by to escort Xiao Pan as it is time for the banquet.

Tonight, Xiang Shaolong is more comfortable and natural compared to last night. The two Lord Changping brothers are sharing his table and Li Si is on his other side. He is seated five tables to the left of Xiao Pan.

Ji Yanran and his wives were absent from the banquet. If not for Zhu Ji’s pleading, the reclusive Ji Yanran would not have attended the banquets.

Qin Qing is even more introvert. In fact, this is the first year she took part in the hunting fair. Did she join the hunting fair to support Ji Yanran, Xiao Pan or Xiang Shaolong?

Prince Dan is the only foreign guest and was seated on the first seat to Xiao Pan’s right. Following his table is Lu Buwei’s and Lord Gaoling’s table.

Lord Gaoling is quite tall and his face is slightly pale. He gives people the impression that he is a playboy and his eyes are pretty dull. With him are two middle-aged men in official robes. From his observation, Xiang Shaolong deduced that they are members of the royal family.

Occasionally, Lu Buwei will speak to Guan Zhongxie who is seated beside him. Surprisingly, Lu Niang Rong is present and she will peep at him intermittently.

Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan are seated behind them with two other advisor guests. Xiang Shaolong has seen them before but could not remember their names.

The number of guests was about the same as last night. Lu Dan'er, Ying Ying and the female warriors occupied four tables in a far corner. With this arrangement, it shows that the Qin court values the female warriors as well as honour the prestigious families of Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er.

Without the two top beauties Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, the atmosphere is less lively.

The barbequed meat and wine was served by the palace guards to each table and the air is filled with the aroma of the piping hot food.

To prevent anyone from adding poison to the food, the palace guards paid special attention to the cooking.

Once in a while, Zhu Ji will talk to Xiao Pan. She may be taking this opportunity to repair their strained relationship.

Due to the noisy chatting and sounds of cutlery clattering, Li Si leaned to Xiang Shaolong's ear and whispered: "The Crown Prince is very satisfied with Huan Qi. This man is well-versed in military warfare and is an extraordinary man. Moreover, he is only at a tender age. With proper grooming, he will be

another capable general.”

Xiang Shaolong is greatly comforted. With Wang Jian, Ji Yanran and Li Si’s praising Huan Qi, this man will surely rise to the occasion.

This is part of his long term plan to counter Lu Buwei. By grooming talented Qin natives, it is easy for the Qin military to accept them and they will form a powerful force to counter Lu Buwei and Lao Ai in the future and will also help to secure Xiao Pan as the rightful King of Qin.

At this point in time, Prince Dan toasted Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Everyone else followed suit.

When Xiang Shaolong put down his wine cup, Lord Changping turned to him and reported: “The Crown Prince has told us about the rebellion. Let’s work together and do a good job. You will take care of the external threats while we take care of the internal threats. We will eliminate every one of them.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You are mistaken. The Crown Prince is charge of both internal and external threats. We are only following his orders.”

Lord Changping was stunned: “The Crown Prince is barely fifteen, I...”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Aren’t you aware that the Crown Prince is a natural born talent in terms of warfare and governance? Don’t tell me you need the Crown Prince to remind you personally?”

Lord Changping understood what he meant and corrected: “Hey, you are

right. Come. Have another drink.”

Lord Changwen leaned over: “Last night, Brother Xiang mentioned that he has lost to Guan Zhongxie. What really happened?”

Lord Changping noted that it is something that concerns Ying Ying and listened with a serious expression.

Xiang Shaolong is willing to sacrifice himself for these two friends. Moreover, Ying Ying is considered a rare beauty. He frankly replied: “Just now, I had a talk with your sister. We will forget about the past but the future is unpredictable. This is because your sister does have feelings for Guan Zhongxie and I have to leave Xianyang City for a period of time after the hunting fair. No one can tell what will happen during this period of time.”

Lord Changping concluded: “Why don’t the two of you get married officially? If Guan Zhongxie still dares to harass Ying Ying, we have the right to interfere.”

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart: “If Ying Ying is agreeable, we shall act as you wished.”

The two brothers are overjoyed and touched at the same time, understanding that Xiang Shaolong is also doing this for their sake.

Lord Changwen cannot sit still anymore and left immediately to look for Ying Ying.

Lu Buwei suddenly toasted Prince Dan and asked: “I heard that the swordplay of Yan is exquisite and focused mainly on soft stances. I wonder if you can demonstrate a few stances for our viewing pleasure.”

Everyone quietened down and everyone is now staring at Prince Dan.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. His secret meetings with Prince Dan have been leaked to Lu Buwei.

Now, he is trying to ridicule the people of Yan and broadcast his own talents.

If he is forced to act, he will walk straight into their trap.

Because whoever that can defeat Xiang Shaolong now will be crowned the number one swordsman of Qin.

Chapter 12

A Chaotic Banquet

Seated between Physician Leng Ting and General Xu Yi Ze, Prince Dan did not show any signs of surprise and smiled: "I heard Mister Guan Zhongxie from your esteemed residence has defeated the experts of Qi. I wonder if he will show us some of his skills."

Prince Dan, the successor to the Yan throne, is used to such challenges and difficulties. He knew that he cannot shy away from duelling. Otherwise, it may be a sign of cowardice and in this foreign state of Qin, he must fight or Qin may use this as an excuse to attack Yan. Success and failures are common in fighting. Even if he loses, he will be disgraced but it is something that is inevitable. However, Prince Dan intentionally singled out Guan Zhongxie to counter Lu Buwei. If Lu Buwei sent Guan Zhongxie out, it shows that Prince Dan has good foresight. If Lu Buwei did not send Guan Zhongxie out, he can only send Lu Chan as Lao Ai has left him and Zhou Zihen was defeated by Jing Jun last night. Prince Dan has seen Lu Chan's sword skills and can choose a fighter from his team to counter his weak points. It is only two simple sentences but it has highlighted the intelligence of Prince Dan.

Lu Buwei did not expect Prince Dan to counter him so effectively and began laughing. He winked at Guan Zhongxie and Guan Zhongxie acknowledged his order with another laugh and stepped out to an open area beside the banquet grounds. He paid his respects to Prince Dan: "I am flattered by your high opinion of my lowly skills. Here I am and will Prince please send your

expert and let us learn from each other.”

Now, it is Prince Dan’s turn to be agonized. Lu Buwei carried out a chain attack and now, it seems like Lu Buwei has no intention to send Guan Zhongxie but did so to appease Prince Dan. Everyone was excited at the martial arts competition as well as the chance to ridicule the people of Yan and cheered loudly. After all, Guan Zhongxie’s swordsmanship is one of the best in Xianyang City and it is possible that he is even better than Xiang Shaolong. With his amazing archery that killed four birds with two arrows, he is now as respected as Xiang Shaolong who threw the five flying needles. But as most people have never seen him fight, everyone is waiting eagerly in anticipation. The crowd is cheering loudly and the mood is extremely lively. Before he even start fighting, Guan Zhongxie has impressed the crowd with his muscular frame, solid built and imposing air.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but glanced over to the female warriors. Every one of them including Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er was whispering at each other and has an intoxicated expression on their faces. He could not help but trembled strongly. If Guan Zhongxie is allowed to show off his might, the two fickle ladies Ying Ying and Lu Dan’er may surrender to his seduction. Now that his injury is more or less healed, should he enter the fighting ring? If he lost, the consequences will be disastrous. But if he did not fight because he was afraid of losing, it will prick his conscience and affect his self-confidence. As he was thinking furiously, Prince Dan pretended to be pleased and sent a fighter from the back seat. This man announced his name to be Yan Du. Everyone was alarmed as this man is a reputable fighter too.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but asked Lord Changping about Yan Du. Lord

Changping happily explained: “This man is one of the top three fighters of Yan. We have no idea that he came to Xianyang City with Prince Dan. It is rumoured that his sword speed is as fast as lightning and can cut open swallows that are flying in mid air. That is how good he is.”

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at Yan Du. Yan Du is a tall and thin man with a lump on each side of his forehead. His eyes are brimming with energy and he is around the age of twenty five. He is not considered a handsome man but has an extraordinary air around him. The most remarkable thing about him is that he is clothed fully in yellow. With a crooked nose like an eagle, he radiates calmness. However, Guan Zhongxie is even more eye-catching than him. In a snow white outfit, his head is tied neatly in a red bun and is half a head taller than the tall Yan Du. If Yan Du is a well-prepared fighter, Guan Zhongxie is casual-looking fighter. On his arrogant face is an irritating smile that shows his despise for everyone. No wonder Ying Ying may be in love with Xiang Shaolong but still succumbed to his advances. Both men paid their respects to Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji, asking permission to begin their fight.

Xiao Pan may not realise that this duel is ultimately aimed to ruin Xiang Shaolong’s reputation but he did not want Guan Zhongxie to have any chance to show off his skills. But with Zhu Ji supporting at the side, he helplessly consented: “The duel is a friendly match and shall cease when a winner has been determined. I do not want to see any bloodshed or deaths tonight.”

Both men kneeled down and accepted his order. However, everyone knows that it is a real duel with real weapons being used. It is really hard to avoid injuring the opponent.

Some brought out two armour suits from the crowd and Guan Zhongxie smiled: "I do not need the armour. Brother Yan, please help yourself."

Yan Du had no choice but to reject the armour too as it will affect his agility. Before they drew their swords, both men stood still under the illumination of the torches. Their killing aura immediately flooded the area as everyone held their breaths in silence so as not to affect their concentration.

Jiang! Yan Du drew his sword first and displayed a magnificent pose with the sword across his chest. True experts like Xiang Shaolong could tell that he is actually succumbing to Guan Zhongxie's pressure and needed to draw his sword and stabilised himself. It is something that only experts can sense. Just like during a battle, an experienced General can predict the victory based on the morale and the determination of the soldiers.

Guan Zhongxie laughed loudly and his left arm patted the sword that was hanging around his right waist. He solemnly state: "My sword is named Longstrike and it is forged by the blacksmiths of Yue. The sword is five feet and four inches long, which makes it one foot longer than most swords. Brother Yan must not neglect its length."

Jiang! Longstrike was drawn out by his right hand in a flash. While everyone is dazzled by the stunning brilliance of the flashing sword, Guan Zhongxie stepped forward and sent his sword towards Yan Du. Xiang Shaolong was reminded about something when he saw Guan Zhongxie patting his sword with his left hand. He summoned the Guardians and instructed them to retrieve his Mohist Sword.

Yan Du's sword flew out and clashed heavily with Guan Zhongxie's sword. DANG! Both men withdrew their sword and retreated a few steps, eyeing each other with caution.

Everyone was still holding their breaths. The first strike is both men testing each other's skills. The real show is yet to come. Xiang Shaolong noticed Yan Du's hand is shaking slightly and guessed that his arm strength is much weaker than Guan Zhongxie. Yan Du may have a very good martial arts foundation but unfortunately, his opponent is Guan Zhongxie.

Glowing with confidence, Guan Zhongxie let out a cold snort and sent another strike towards Yan Du. Although the attack is similar to the one before, the onlookers can sense that it is an earth-shattering attack that will be quite impossible to defend no matter who you are. Yan Du roared and his sword flicked out from the side, drawing an arc before clashing with Longstrike with a loud KENG! Despite making a later move, his sword hit first and did not disgrace the reputation of Yan swordplay. Even so, he was shaken and had to take a small step back. Guan Zhongxie was about to press on with another attack when Yan Du roared again and took three steps back. In his hands, his sword drew circles in the air which reflected the torches. Now his sword appears to be on fire. It is an amazing swordplay and everyone finally broke the silence and exploded in loud cheering.

Guan Zhongxie did not expect his swordplay to be so exquisite and it prevented him from advancing further. Summoning his heroic courage, he let out a long roar and withdrew his sword. He swing it strongly forward like a trail of rainbow and the sword rung loudly as it sliced through the air. His pose is awe-inspiring and exudes a godly aura and a sense of invincibility. The

feeling is so intense that even Yan Du is affected and his battle strength dropped by twenty percent. The two weapons clashed in a blink of an eye and they exchanged several strokes spontaneously. Like a bolt from the blue, both men suddenly retreated at the speed of light. As no one can see their earlier fight very clearly, it is still a mystery who the winner is.

Jiang! Guan Zhongxie sheathed his sword. Despite both his eyes still focusing on his opponent, his sword accurately entered the tiny gap of his sheathe like a poisonous snake with eyes. Everyone was shocked at his gesture while the female warriors are cheering at the top of their voices.

Yan Du's sword is still aimed at Guan Zhongxie but his face has turned completely white and there are large drops of perspiration on his forehead. He shook and lowered his sword on the floor, leaning against it like a walking stick. It seems like he has over exerted himself. On his forehead, there is a horizontal sword wound. It is only a surface wound as Guan Zhongxie has been merciful. However, such a prominent injury and resulting scar will only constantly remind Yan Du and the people around him that he was once defeated by this heartless man.

Guan Zhongxie cupped his hands: "Thanks for allowing me to win."

Someone came out from the crowd and helped a furious Yan Du out. In the midst of all the cheering, Guan Zhongxie paid his respects to Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Prince Dan and Leng Ting maintained a calm expression but Xu Yi Ze and the other men were incensed at Guan Zhongxie's offending injury.

Lu Buwei laughed loudly: "Guan Zhongxie, you disobeyed the Crown Prince's

order and blood is seen. I punish you with this cup of wine.”

By now, even Prince Dan and Leng Ting have an ugly expression on their faces as Lu Buwei has gone too far with this insolent remark.

Sitting at Lu Buwei’s table, Cai Ze exclaimed: “Zhongxie’s swordsmanship had aroused our interest. I wonder if Assistant Commander Jing is around. I would love to see him pitting his skills against Zhongxie.”

Guan Zhongxie received his cup of wine from Lu Buwei and toasted in the direction of Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and the crowd. Everyone in the crowd raised their wine cups and toasted to him in return. Xiang Shaolong is more sure than ever that Lu Buwei is out to get him. He guessed that Lu Buwei believes that Xiao Pan holds him in high regard because he is a national hero. Thus, before he ‘dies’, Lu Buwei wants to disgrace Xiang Shaolong in public and make Xiao Pan shift his hero-worship to Guan Zhongxie instead.

With Cai Ze’s comment, it is hard for him to remain silent. He plainly states: “Assistant Commander is attending to some duties and is not present at the banquet. I am sorry for disappointing Official Cai.”

Cai Ze is well-prepared for his answer and continued his digging: “Last night, there is also a man named Huan Qi who won three consecutive fights. Let’s have a taste of his skills again!”

Lu Buwei’s supporters begin to cheer supportively at his suggestion. Obviously, they are trying to instigate a fight between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie.

Lord Changping sensed that something is amiss. He whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ears: "They are trying to embarrass you! Hng!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that this fight is inevitable. There is no way he will let Huan Qi fight Guan Zhongxie. If Huan Qi is killed or heavily injured by Guan Zhongxie, he would have let Wang Jian down and Xiao Pan's dream of a special elite force will be dashed. Even if Huan Qi did not suffer any injuries, his newly minted reputation will be destroyed. He glanced quickly at the female warriors and saw that every one of them including Ying Ying are totally mesmerized by Guan Zhongxie. If he did not fight now, Ying Ying will be lost to Guan Zhongxie and Jing Jun will lose Lu Dan'er too. Moreover, if he came up with another excuse that Huan Qi is away for work, Lu Buwei's men will spread rumours that he, Xiang Shaolong, is afraid of Guan Zhongxie. Finally, he looked at Xiao Pan. Xiao Pan is looking back at him with a hopeful expression.

Rejuvenated, Xiang Shaolong let out a long laugh. He stood up and casually said: "Since Official Guan is so enthusiastic, let me have some fun with you!"

The crowd was completely silent for a split second before erupting into loud clapping and cheering.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: "Official Xiang's leg is injured and should not fight. If the wound reopened, I will feel guilty."

Zhu Ji interrupted: "Shaolong should not force yourself!"

Xiang Shaolong unbuckled Bloodwave and handed it to Wu Shu behind him.

He received the Mohist Sword and felt his fighting spirit rising. He thought that since he will have to fight him sooner or later, it might as well be tonight. He smiled: "If Official Guan can make my wound reopen, I will surrender the fight to you!"

The crowd saw that his words are full of dominating spirit and clapped loudly for him, adding to the liveliness of the situation. Xiang Shaolong exchanged a knowing glance at Prince Dan and Leng Ting before he walked to the centre of the fighting arena. Standing side by side with Guan Zhongxie, they paid their respects to Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan has full confidence in Xiang Shaolong's amazing swordplay. Pleased, he advised both of them: "Weapons are blind, please fight with caution."

Xiang Shaolong understood that Xiao Pan wanted him to kill Guan Zhongxie. Inspired, he thought of a winning strategy. Guan Zhongxie believed that he will be dying tomorrow and will not sacrifice his own life to defeat him. Based on this point, he is at a serious disadvantage. Another benefit is that he has seen Guan Zhongxie fight but Guan Zhongxie has no idea about his own swordplay but only managed to hear it from other people's experiences. If he demonstrated his full Mohist swordplay, he is confident of giving Guan Zhongxie a run for his money. Thinking about these points, he formulated a winning plan.

Both men stood apart from each other. As the crowd looked on, they stared at each other's eyes and thus, the ultimate battle has begun! By now, there are many onlookers who have gathered around when they heard about the duelling. Now, the whole place is extremely packed. When Wu Shu went back

to retrieve the Mohist Sword, Ji Yanran and the girls were alarmed and hurriedly rushed over. Now, they managed to squeeze themselves at Lord Changping's table. Qin Qing is here as well and joined their table. Everyone is in a great mood. Zhu Ji is worried that Guan Zhongxie will injure Xiang Shaolong and her expression is grave. She nearly wanted to leave as she could not bear to see the fight.

Guan Zhongxie humbly state: "Being able to fight with Official Xiang is one of the highlights of my life."

Xiang Shaolong coldly replied: "I wonder if Official Guan will use his best skill today – the Left Hand Swordplay?"

The moment he said this, the crowd went: "Wah..."

Nobody expected that in all his past fights, Guan Zhongxie had been concealing his true ability.

For the first time ever, Guan Zhongxie's face changed colour and he dryly smiled: "Official Xiang is truly observant."

This is the moment Xiang Shaolong has been waiting for. The Mohist Sword leaning on his shoulder sprang into the air and he advanced forward quickly. Using the heavy weight of the Mohist sword, he attacked Guan Zhongxie face on.

Jiang! Indeed, Guan Zhongxie pulled out his sword using his left arm and adopted the horse stance. As quick as lightning, he blocked the Mohist

sword. Instead of following up with another attack, Xiang Shaolong withdrew and adopted one of the three Mozi killing stances: Defending Attack. The wooden sword was flying everywhere and Guan Zhongxie could not decipher if it is an attacking stance or a defending stance. Moreover, he was distracted by Xiang Shaolong earlier and did not know how to counter him. Reluctantly, he took two steps back to recompose himself. Everyone saw that Xiang Shaolong performed a miraculous first attack befitting his reputation and broke out into loud cheers.

Xiang Shaolong entered the calm state of Mohist meditation and abandoned all his emotions, including the fear of defeat, fear of death, etc. His mind is completely clear and every single movement made by Guan Zhongxie cannot escape his eyes. Everyone saw that both are awe-inspiring warriors and resembled heavenly generals and could not help but feel even more excited than before. It is the first time Ying Ying and the female warriors witnessed Xiang Shaolong's fascinating skills and were completely swept away. For the moment, they did not know who to cheer for.

Guan Zhongxie can detect the increasing confidence and fighting power of Xiang Shaolong. The corner of his mouth curled in a smile and he coldly snorted before he sent his sword towards Xiang Shaolong. From this attack, everyone can tell that his left hand is indeed superior to his right hand. His head, arm, waist and feet were in perfect coordination. Although it is only his left arm holding the sword, it felt like his whole body is part of the attack. It is a startling move that sends shivers down everyone's spine. It is an incredibly fast attack but it looks slow at the same time. Everyone can see his sword clearly and even can predict where it will hit. Even so, the attack is so powerful that it seems to be unavoidable. Such a unique move that is both

fast and slow is the pinnacle of swordplay.

While everyone is worried for Xiang Shaolong, Xiang Shaolong maintained his calm expression and used his left hand to hold his sword instead. In a perfect counterattack, the heavy Mohist Sword landed squarely three inches away from the tip of Guan Zhongxie's sword. Xiang Shaolong is truly formidable. Using the heavy wooden sword, he has nullified Guan Zhongxie's stronger arm strength. At the same time, the blow hit the weakest point of Guan Zhongxie's sword and deflected it away.

Never in his wildest dreams would Guan Zhongxie expect Xiang Shaolong to use his left hand. All his earlier strategies have gone to waste. He was also alarmed at the heavy wooden sword's attacking power. Xiang Shaolong consecutively attacked him three times but Guan Zhongxie did not take a single step back but defend himself well. Using his strength and fast reflexes, he met each of Xiang Shaolong's heavy blows head on. Everyone was intoxicated by their grandeur and madly cheered for both of them.

Every time their weapons clashed, a loud sound was made. After the three heavy blows, Xiang Shaolong followed up with another seven blows. Before the crowd suffocated under the aura of his pressing attacks, the two men separated and stared at each other fiercely. Xiang Shaolong needed to catch his breath while Guan Zhongxie needed to recover from the fierce attacks and did not dare to retaliate.

Xiang Shaolong is full of admiration. He crossed swords with Xiao Weimou before and often sparred with Teng Yi who has better arm strength than himself. Thus, he is familiar when dealing with people like Guan Zhongxie. In

his ten attacks, he incorporated elements of biology, parabolic and rotation theory but Guan Zhongxie still managed to fend him off without taking a step backwards. Thus, Guan Zhongxie's defending skills are watertight and have reached an extremely high level. In addition, he attacked Guan Zhongxie when he is in a disadvantaged position but is unable to overcome him. Based on this point, he knows that he cannot defeat him. But this is normal under ordinary circumstances. Ultimately, fights are normally won on psychology factors and strategy which Xiang Shaolong happened to be an expert on both subjects.

Guan Zhongxie is horrified. Since the day he learnt sword-fighting, he has always focused on sword attacks. For the past ten clashes, he is painfully defending himself. This is something that he has never encountered all his life. The crowd became silent as everyone anticipated their second bout. Guan Zhongxie composed himself earlier that Xiang Shaolong and immediately sent his sword flying towards Xiang Shaolong. His sword swung up from below, aiming at Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Holding his sword horizontally across him, a steady Xiang Shaolong let out a long howl and ignored the incoming sword. He slanted his body to one side and sent his own sword towards Guan Zhongxie's forehead. Everyone was shocked but Xiang Shaolong knew better. He has yet to catch his breath from their earlier exchange. If he insisted on defending himself, he will be forced to retreat. When that happens, Guan Zhongxie can follow up with more attacks and sooner or later, he will succumb to his stronger arm strength. But with his unorthodox move, he has avoided the attack partially and Guan Zhongxie will need some time to change the direction of his attack. It is a trick to stall for time. In the end, he may be heavily injured but his heavy

Mohist sword will land on Guan Zhongxie's forehead and kill him instantly.

This is the first time in his life Guan Zhongxie is fighting a man who is willing to sacrifice his own life to win. As Xiang Shaolong expected, Guan Zhongxie will not sacrifice himself and frantically withdrew his sword to deflect his blow. DANG! A loud sound resonated throughout the area. Xiang Shaolong has used up every single bit of strength in his body in this attack. Coupled with the heavy wooden sword, Guan Zhongxie was badly shaken and could not hold back any more. He finally took a step back.

Xiang Shaolong will not let this golden opportunity slip by. He used the most powerful Mozi Killing Stance: Attacking and Defending at the same time. His sword aura became more powerful and his attacks are full of intricate changes. Like waves after waves of the majestic river, he assaulted Guan Zhongxie relentlessly. Guan Zhongxie saw that his moves are out of the ordinary and let out a long howl, defending himself from all his attacks. Every onlooker from Xiao Pan to the palace guards were shouting out their cheers and it was an emotional scene.

Xiang Shaolong's killing aura grew and he forgot all about the Mohist swordplay. He simply attacked Guan Zhongxie whenever there is an opening and his moves are unpredictable. Like a pouncing beast, he was full of energy, fast and every single attack he made is vicious and out to take Guan Zhongxie's life. Against his own wishes, Guan Zhongxie is forced to retreat. When he took the seventh step back, Xiang Shaolong's attack became weaker and Guan Zhongxie managed to turn the tables around using a special move and blocked Xiang Shaolong's sword. After Xiang Shaolong attacked him one more time, he retreated and leisurely put his wooden

sword on his shoulder. Guan Zhongxie sighed with relief and dared not retaliate. Again, the two men stared at each other fiercely.

With a shocked expression on his face, Lu Buwei stood up and shouted: “Stop!”

Everyone turned and looked at him.

End of Book 14